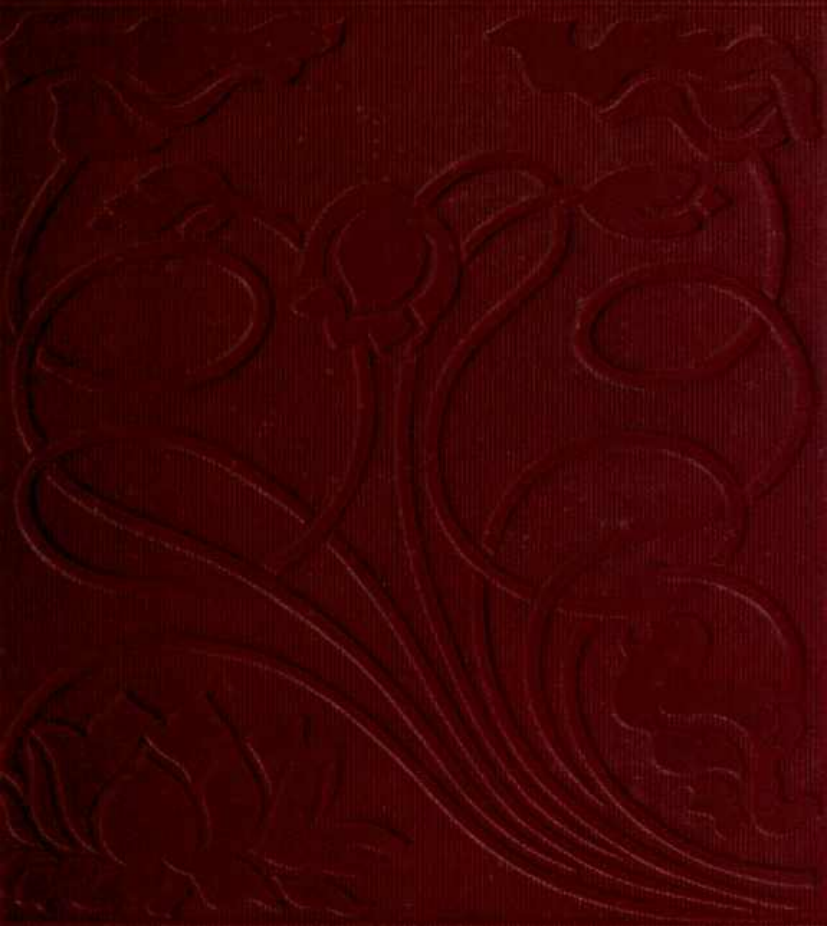
THE MYSTERY OF LINCOLN'S INN



ROBERT MACHRAY

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THE MYSTERY
OF
LINCOLN'S INN

BY

ROBERT MACHRAY

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"A BLOW OVER THE HEART," ETC.

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THE
MYSTERY OF LINCOLN'S INN

CHAPTER I

It was at half-past ten in the forenoon of a Saturday in July that Mr. Cooper Silwood, precise in attire, composed in appearance, and punctual as usual to the minute, walked into his room on the first floor of 176 New Square, Lincoln's Inn, where were the offices of Eversleigh, Silwood and Eversleigh, the well-known and long-established firm of solicitors of which he was a partner.

He was met, as was customary, on his entrance by the head-clerk, John Williamson, who had already opened and sorted out methodically the letters received over-night. An admirable specimen of his class, Williamson generally wore an air of great imperturbability, but this morning his face had a troubled expression.

"Anything special, Mr. Williamson?" asked Silwood quietly, putting away his hat and gloves.

"There are two or three important matters to attend to, sir," replied the man quickly. "The most important is a letter from Mr. Morris Thornton," he continued, but in a markedly different tone; at the

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same time, he looked at his principal with an anxiety he tried hard but just failed to dissemble.

"From Mr. Thornton," observed Silwood, calmly; he noticed, but was in no wise disconcerted by, the head-clerk's manner.

"Yes, sir; he writes from Vancouver."

"And what does he say?" inquired Silwood.

"He states that he is coming home immediately," answered Williamson, and now there was unmistakable anxiety in his voice as well as in his face.

"Indeed!" exclaimed Silwood, who had given a slight yet perceptible start on hearing the news. "It's surely very sudden," he went on after a pause of a few seconds. "In his last letter—let me see; we got it about a fortnight ago—he said nothing about returning soon to England."

"He did not mention it at all, sir, I am certain. But you will see from this last letter of his that he has a very strong reason for leaving British Columbia; he is seriously ill—so ill that he has been warned by his doctor to set his affairs in order. One knows what that means—he is in a critical condition."

And again Williamson scanned his master's face apprehensively.

"Ah, very sad," said Silwood, but he spoke in a strange, hollow tone, glancing the while at Williamson with a curious glittering light in his eyes that was sinister and menacing. It suddenly faded away, however, and he asked quite evenly, "Does he say when he is coming?"

"Oddly enough, sir, he gives no precise date. But here is his letter," said Williamson, picking it out from the pile on Silwood's table.

Silwood, knowing Williamson was watching him narrowly, and conscious that it was necessary to preserve an aspect of calmness, read Thornton's letter with the utmost deliberation and with no more concern than was natural in the pitiful circumstances of the case.

"Very sad, very sad," he said, when he had perused the letter, which he put down in front of him with elaborate carelessness; "very distressing!" he added, shaking his head.

There was a moment of silence, and then Silwood remarked to Williamson that he might go, but as the head-clerk was withdrawing he called him back.

"Has Mr. Eversleigh come in yet?" he asked.

"Yes, sir; a few minutes ago."

"Have you told him about this letter from Mr. Thornton?"

"No, sir."

"That's right, Mr. Williamson. I'll tell him about it myself."

Silwood nodded Williamson's dismissal, and the clerk, who had undoubtedly been studying his principal intently and wonderingly during their conversation, bowed and went out.

"It's plain that Williamson has his suspicions," said Silwood to himself, after the door had closed upon the head-clerk. "He is inclined to think there's something wrong—I could see it in his manner—it suggested he was afraid there was some trouble impending. But he knows nothing—he can know nothing."

He assured himself, however, that what Williamson knew or suspected did not matter much.

But what did matter, what did matter enormously, was this letter of Thornton's.

Taking it up again, he read it over very carefully twice or thrice; then, still holding it in his hand, he walked up and down the floor many times, absorbed in thought. His small, hard, keen eyes gleamed angrily, the lines of his cold, pale, clean-shaven face seemed to become deeper, and his hands opened and shut convulsively as he paced his room. Now and again he looked at a large japanned box which stood in one corner. With a quick, nervous movement peculiar to him in moments of doubt, he stopped and pushed up the heavy brown wig which he always wore by day, and sat down at his table. Once more he re-read Thornton's letter.

"Thornton's coming back in this unexpected way," he said to himself, "upsets my plan—that is quite clear; my hand is forced. What is to be done now? The worst of it is that Thornton does not say when he is coming—which is more than a little strange. He is well on his way, no doubt, by this time; he may drop in upon us any day. I must prepare for it. I never looked for his return—at least, not for a long time. His coming precipitates the crisis. Well, it was bound to come sooner or later. I must consider my position coolly."

He knew he would not be disturbed for an hour, as it was a fixed rule of the office that no one was to be shown in to him till half-past eleven. He thought best, pen in hand, seated at his table, and there he sat, a still, immovable figure, save when he jotted something on his blotting-pad, for several minutes. But his was a nimble brain, and his mind was soon made up.

"I must see Eversleigh," he told himself, "and acquaint him with—everything." As he thought this,

he half smiled, and his eyes for an instant had in them the same threatening gleam that had flashed upon Williamson.

Next he went to the large japanned box that stood in the corner, and touching a spring cleverly concealed in the moulding round its base, gained access to a narrow, shelf-like cavity at the bottom, which was stuffed with papers. From this secret place he extracted a folio sheet covered with figures, against which were various initials, "M.T." being conspicuous from their frequency amongst them.

He went over this document very carefully, added up the figures opposite the "M.T."s, and put down the total on his pad.

"A quarter of a million," he whispered almost aloud. "It's an immense sum. What a thing to have to tell Eversleigh!"

Then he folded up and replaced the sheet of figures in the receptable hidden at the bottom of the big box, but when he tried to close up the aperture he experienced great difficulty in getting the spring to act; finally, however, he succeeded.

"I ought to see to that at once," he said with decision, "but I dare not."

He now proceeded to skim over the rest of his correspondence with extraordinary rapidity but with little real attention; at the back of his mind he was still occupied with the return of Morris Thornton.

All at once a thought struck him.

"I wonder if Kitty Thornton has heard from her father by the same post? If so, she may know the date on which to expect him," was what he said to himself, adding, "if she knows, Eversleigh will know." For

Miss Kitty Thornton lived practically as a member of the family of Francis Eversleigh, the senior partner of the firm.

Silwood went to the door of his room, opened it quietly, and looked out. A young and handsome man was springing lightly up the stairs; the two men exchanged somewhat cold nods.

"Good morning, Gilbert," said Silwood, but without much cordiality.

"Good morning," returned the other, with a distant air.

"Going up to see your father, I suppose?" asked Silwood.

"Yes. Mr. Williamson, whom I met in the square, told me he was in," replied Gilbert Eversleigh, and with another nod went on upstairs.

"I'll just give you five minutes," said Silwood, under his breath, addressing the back of the unconscious Gilbert, who knocked at a door on the second floor and was admitted.

"I thought I'd look in, sir, to ask how they all are at home," said Gilbert to his father, Francis Eversleigh. Gilbert had his own chambers in the Temple, of which he was a member, and for the past three years had not lived at his father's house in Surbiton.

Francis Eversleigh gazed at his son before answering the implied question, and a father's pride expressed itself clearly in his face. The son was dear to the father's heart.

"They're all very well at home—your mother and your sister and Kitty," responded Francis Eversleigh, lingering somewhat on the last word. Glancing away from his son to the window, he remarked casually,

"Really, I think Miss Kitty grows prettier and more charming every day."

"She is lovely," cried Gilbert, with rising colour.

"By the way," observed the father, pointedly, "Harry Bennet came in last evening, and it was not hard to see the attraction."

"Miss Kitty?"

"Yes."

"But Harry Bennet!" said Gilbert, in a voice of protest.

"Yes. He stayed quite late."

"But you know, sir," objected Gilbert, with a frown, "that Harry is said to be going the pace—making the sparks fly furiously."

Francis Eversleigh did not reply. He thought he had given his son a plain enough hint; besides, Bennet was a client of his own, and he did not wish to pursue the subject further. Gilbert walked over to the window and stood there, while his father covertly watched him. Presently he faced round; the frown had disappeared; his expression was confident and eager.

Father and son looked at each other. Seen thus together, the family likeness between them was pronounced; seen apart, the differences became prominent.

Francis Eversleigh was a tall, stout, florid, handsome man; genial, easy-going, unsuspicious, self-indulgent—not a typical solicitor in appearance or character. Inheriting early in life a fine business, he had gradually allowed himself to give way to a constitutional indolence, a fatality of temperament which Gilbert happily had escaped. Gilbert was tall and fair and good-looking, but he was more slimly made than his father, and was charged with far more vitality and force. He was

alert, active, resolute. In brief, he was strong and keen where his father was weak and slack.

"It's a glorious day, sir," said Gilbert, "and as it's a Saturday and I have nothing on of importance, I think I'll run over to Surbiton and spend the afternoon and evening. I'll wire mother I'm coming."

"What! No work to do!" the father made laughing demur. But he immediately followed with the words, "Well, well, my boy, go and enjoy yourself. It's fine to be young!"

What he really meant, of course, was, "Go and see Kitty, you lucky young dog, and good fortune go with you." He knew that Gilbert loved the girl, and there was nothing in all the world he desired more than that Gilbert should succeed in his court to her.

As Gilbert turned to leave the room, Cooper Silwood entered it, carrying an open letter in his hand. After Gilbert had withdrawn, Silwood took care to see the door was shut.

CHAPTER II

"HERE is a letter from Morris Thornton," said Silwood, shooting a keen, swift glance at his partner, but it escaped the other's notice.

Francis Eversleigh's thoughts, in fact, played pleasantly around his son Gilbert and Kitty Thornton, or if he had seen that look it might have startled him out of the complacent musings which forecast a fortunate ending only.

"Yes," he said, rather apathetically. For though the mention of the name of Kitty's father chimed in agreeably with his reflections, the firm received communications frequently from Morris Thornton—which was only natural, as he was by far the most important client it possessed, and therefore the arrival of this particular letter excited no special interest in his breast. "Is it more money for investment?" he inquired, tranquilly.

But Silwood did not answer the question. Instead of doing so, he scanned the letter with those little, sharp eyes of his, while his smooth, pallid face was as void of expression as a block of stone.

"What does Morris say?" asked Eversleigh, after a pause.

"Did you see Miss Kitty this morning?" Silwood queried, ignoring the other's words; moreover, he spoke

in such a tone as was significant of the relations between the two partners—it suggested the idea that he was accustomed to direct Eversleigh, and not to be directed by him.

"Certainly, I saw her this morning," replied Eversleigh, beginning to wonder a little.

"Did she have nothing to tell you about her father?"

"She did not allude to him at all."

"Do you happen to know if she received a letter from him this morning?"

"I'm pretty sure she did not; if she had, she would doubtless have mentioned it," said Eversleigh, looking blankly at the questioner. "But what are you driving at, Cooper?" he asked.

"Morris Thornton informs us in this letter that he is coming back to England——"

"Indeed!" cried Eversleigh, breaking in; "that's good news. I shall be very glad to see him again."

And there was a pleasant smile on Eversleigh's face.

"Yes, he's coming home," Silwood went on; "but he doesn't state exactly when. I thought he probably would write Miss Kitty about the same time that he wrote us, giving the precise date—say, of his sailing from New York; he generally comes by that route."

"I should think he has written her," said Francis Eversleigh, "but she had not received a letter this morning up to the time of my leaving Surbiton, so far as I know. Did the letter to us come by the first delivery or the second? If it came by the latter, then most likely she would get her letter, if there was one for her, by it also. But that would be after I had left Surbiton."

"That's it, I believe," observed Silwood, who had been examining the postmarks on the envelope in which Thornton's letter had been enclosed; "our letter came by the second delivery. I am convinced that when you return to Surbiton you will find Miss Kitty has heard from her father. He will certainly have told her when to expect him, and we must get to know the exact date he specifies; it is most important."

"It is certainly very odd," remarked Eversleigh, leisurely and without much curiosity, "that so business-like a man as Morris does not give a positive date either for leaving New York or for arriving here; but I don't know, after all, that it is so particularly important. The important thing, of course, is that he is coming back again, and I'm heartily pleased to hear it. He's been away a long time without a holiday at home—seven years, isn't it? Kitty was only fourteen," continued Eversleigh, in a vein of reminiscence, "when he left her in my wife's charge, and now she is twenty-one. How happy the news will make the child! Strange he doesn't mention a date—strange, as you say, Cooper. But can't you make a pretty fair guess at the approximate date from his letter? You haven't yet told me what he says in it. What does he say?"

Cooper Silwood glanced at the letter as if to refresh his memory, yet he knew its contents so perfectly that he could have repeated it word for word.

"He tells us," said Silwood, deliberately, "that the reason for his returning to England is the state of his health, which is now most precarious."

"Dear me!" interrupted Eversleigh, with lively concern.

"He says he is subject to exceedingly serious heart-trouble, and has been warned by his doctor that he may not have long to live."

"Good Heavens!" ejaculated Eversleigh, his face suddenly grown grave. The friendship between him and Morris Thornton had lasted many years; indeed, they had been boys together at Rugby, and the sad tidings pained him greatly. "Poor Morris!" he said, in a low, hushed voice; "how dreadful! I thought I should be so glad to see him once more, but—but this is too terrible—too terrible!"

Silwood had been almost as much of a friend to the doomed man as his partner, but he uttered no words of regret, far less of sorrow. While Eversleigh was speaking, he turned away, with a slight gesture of impatience, and fixed his eyes on some shelves filled with law-books.

There was a short silence, and then Eversleigh, still in that small, hushed voice, asked if there was anything more in Thornton's letter.

"He intends to consult Sir Anthony Mortimer, the great heart specialist, but he has no real hope of recovery," replied Silwood, with another glance at the letter. "Then he goes on to say that he will devote the whole of the time left him to putting all his affairs in thorough order, so that Miss Kitty will have no trouble in the future. He thanks us for the care and judgment we have shown in investing the sums of money he has from time to time remitted us from Canada, and, as a matter of form, he would like to check over the securities, certificates of shares, etc., we hold for him. He concludes by stating that when his agents have realized the remainder of his estate in British Columbia

the proceeds will be placed in our hands, and that he will leave instructions to this effect."

Though Eversleigh had asked for the information Silwood thus gave him, his mind was so stunned by the grave news concerning the condition of his friend that he hardly took in what his partner said. Silwood saw that Eversleigh was not following him. He now spoke sharply and abruptly, so that Eversleigh was compelled to listen.

"Morris, I take it," said he, "wishes to make an examination into his affairs—an investigation, one might call it; *that* is the meaning of his desire to check over the securities, certificates of shares, etc., in our hands."

"Well, it's very natural in the circumstances," observed Eversleigh. "Poor Morris! Poor fellow! To have fought all these long years for his fortune—to have won—and now to be robbed of the fruits of the struggle; it must be bitter—bitter! Such a fine fortune, too! Thanks to your financial ability, Cooper," continued Eversleigh, with returning complacency, "his estate is in a highly satisfactory condition; everything is in apple-pie order; he will be delighted with your admirable management. It's a great fortune," he added, meditatively. "What we hold of it, Cooper, is something like a quarter of a million, is it not?"

"Yes, yes," assented Silwood, speaking rapidly. "Francis," he went on, his manner for the first time showing a trace of nervousness, his speech a touch of incoherence, "that's what I must talk to you about—there's a very good reason why I am so anxious as to the date of Morris Thornton's arrival—something must be done at once."

"What do you mean, Cooper?" asked Eversleigh, his attention aroused; "I don't understand you."

Silwood had up to this point been standing; he now seated himself and gazed fixedly at his partner, on whose face was to be seen some uneasiness but no great alarm—rather a vague wonder.

"Frank," said Silwood, steadily, and now master of himself, "prepare yourself—I have something to say—I have a confession to make."

As he heard these words, Eversleigh, with a sudden movement, pushed his chair back from the table. Fearful of what was coming, he stared at Silwood, his mild eyes big with surprise and terror.

"What is it?" he stammered, in increasing agitation —"what is it?" And he jumped up to his feet excitedly, exclaiming, "A confession to make! You! Am I going out of my senses? My God! What do you mean, Cooper?"

"What I mean is this," said Silwood, keeping his eyes fastened snake-like on Eversleigh as if to magnetize him: "when Morris Thornton comes to look into his affairs and ask for the securities and so forth we are supposed to hold——"

"Supposed to hold!" cried Eversleigh, in tremulous accents.

"When he asks us for his property he will discover——"

"No, no, no—never that, Cooper!" interrupted Eversleigh, at last perceiving the other's drift.

"He will discover that his estate has vanished; it does not exist," said Silwood.

"What!" ejaculated Eversleigh, staring wildly at his partner, and still only half believing his ears, still

only half comprehending the sweep of the calamity in which he was involved.

"The truth is, Frank, that, unknown to you, I've been speculating on the Stock Exchange, and I've lost everything, or practically everything. If we were called upon to-day," Silwood went on in a hard, penetrating tone which forced conviction on the mind of the miserable man to whom he spoke, "to produce our clients' securities, bonds, shares and monies, we should have very little to give them—the bulk has disappeared."

"We are defaulters," moaned Eversleigh, in accents of horror. And as he spoke, realizing and overwhelmed by the disaster that had overtaken him, the big, soft man seemed to shrivel and shrink up. With a pitiful sound, plaintive, appealing, like the cry of a hurt child, he covered his face with his hands and sank into his seat.

"Some years ago," Silwood resumed, "I was tempted to speculate. It appeared to be a certainty, but I lost. To gain back what I had ventured, I speculated again, with no better result. And this happened over and over again. I did not always lose, or I might have become discouraged. So I kept hoping and hoping to right myself, but I only sank deeper and deeper in the mire."

While Silwood was speaking, a dark painful flush overspread Eversleigh's face, then the blood ebbed slowly away from it, and left the cheeks deathly pale.

"I have put off telling you of our position," continued Silwood, in the same measured, monotonous, curiously callous voice that he had spoken in during most of the interview, "but the early coming—he may be here any day—of Morris Thornton compels me

to state exactly how we stand. You see now why I am so anxious to know the date of his return to England."

Eversleigh slowly raised his head and looked at Silwood the reproach, anger, and rage he felt but could not express—he was so overcome, so dazed, that his tongue could not find words. He saw with appalling clearness, as in a flash of lightning, all that Silwood's disclosure meant—dishonour, ruin, and the convict's cell for himself, the brand of shame and infamy for his family. He had blindly trusted Silwood all these years, and, though he himself had taken not a penny of the clients' funds, the law would hold him equally guilty with his partner.

"Something must be done," urged Silwood.

"There is only one thing to do," said Eversleigh, finding words at last; "we must make the truth known at once."

"No," said Silwood, emphatically; "that would be sheer folly; it will be soon enough to act in that way when we must. Besides, is there no scheme that we can devise to——"

"What scheme could be devised?"

"I have thought of one," said Silwood, and for several minutes he spoke to Eversleigh in low tones of persuasion, but Eversleigh refused to agree to what he proposed.

"No," said Eversleigh, finally; "I'll never consent to that—never, come what may."

"Think it over, Frank," Silwood pressed him—"think it over calmly; and, in any case, there is no need for precipitancy."

"If I did my duty," said Eversleigh, with a groan, "I should hand you and myself over to the police!"

"That would be madness," replied Silwood. "Think of it, man! You will never be such a fool."

Eversleigh rose to his feet with a sudden pathetic dignity.

"Leave me!" he commanded Silwood; "I can bear no more."

And Cooper Silwood hesitated, then obeyed. When he was gone out of the room, Eversleigh sat staring, staring at the door.

It seemed to him incredible, impossible, that a few brief minutes could work such havoc, such disaster, such irremediable ruin. Only a short time before, that fine young man, that handsome and debonair son of his, of whom he was so proud, had stood in this room, and had gone away smiling and hopeful; and now——

Eversleigh felt like one in a nightmare falling through immeasurable depths.

CHAPTER III

That afternoon Gilbert Eversleigh went over, as he had intended, to Ivydene, his father's residence in Surbiton, a large and commodious villa standing among trees and shrubs in its own grounds on the road from Kingston to Thames Ditton, about three-quarters of a mile from the market-place of the former. From its upper windows there were to be got pleasant glimpses of the river and of the Home Park beyond. The Eversleighs were very fond of their house, and, in an unassertive way, proud of it. Certainly it was the centre of as sweet and well-ordered a home-life as any in England.

Gilbert's telegram to his mother had prepared her for his coming, and when he arrived he was warmly greeted by her and his sister Helen, a fair girl with the family good-looks, who inquired if he was going to spend the rest of the day with them. Gilbert replied that he did not purpose returning to town till the last train, and suggested it would be "very nice on the river."

While he was speaking, Miss Kitty Thornton made her appearance, and as she shook hands with him his eyes sparkled with admiration—and small wonder!

For Miss Kitty was a splendid piece of flesh and blood, full of life and the joy and the spirit of youth.

A little over twenty-one, she was old enough to be a woman and young enough to be a girl. She was not too tall nor too slim. She belonged to the dark type. She had black hair and plenty of it, and big black expressive eyes which often spoke her thoughts when her tongue was silent; on each cheek glowed a spot of bright colour as large as a half-opened wild rose, but of a deeper shade; her lips were of a deeper shade still; her skin was of a warm dusky tint.

It was a strikingly brilliant face, but it had a delicacy of feature, a fineness of line not common in dark women. When it was in repose it was beautiful, yet somehow it hinted sorrow, melancholy, unhappy love, tragedy; but it was seldom in repose, and when it was lit up with animation, with feeling or laughter, as it usually was, it was as radiantly lovely as mortal man could wish to see.

There was a great heart in her too, but it had not yet been tried and proved. Hitherto she had moved in a sheltered world; of evil, and the unending struggle and strife of men and women outside, she had only a faint conception; the din of life had never clashed upon her ears.

Her father, on the death of her mother, had brought her over from Canada to Mrs. Eversleigh, begging the wife of his old friend to take care of her for him. And Mrs. Eversleigh, a gracious woman, had gladly assented to his request. Kitty thus became a member of the family, and was educated along with Helen both in England and on the continent. The girls were like sisters. Kitty was deeply attached to Mrs. Eversleigh, and, in a less degree, to Francis Eversleigh. She was very happy with the Eversleighs.

"Have they told you the good news, Gilbert?" asked Kitty, a note of rejoicing in her voice.

"Not yet," interposed Helen Eversleigh; "there hasn't been time."

"Tell me," said Gilbert, with a smile. "What is it?"

"I got a letter from my father this morning, and he says that he is returning to England very soon," said Kitty, gleefully.

"That is indeed good news for you," Gilbert agreed. "I thought you looked very much pleased about something," he added.

"Pleased! I should say I am!"

"And when is he coming?" asked Gilbert.

"He says he will be here very soon," answered Kitty—"in a few days after his letter. He does not say quite when, but he writes, 'I will pop in and surprise you some day in the week next after that in which you receive this.' The very uncertainty as to the date," remarked the girl, brightly, "gives a keener edge to one's pleasure."

"I dare say that is what he intended," said Mrs. Eversleigh.

The three ladies looked delighted—as indeed they were. Gilbert seemed delighted also, but inwardly the news made him feel downcast.

Passionately as he loved Kitty Thornton, the thought of the large fortune she would inherit, which Morris Thornton's approaching visit brought home to him afresh, had been a check upon him; so, too, was the fact that she was the ward, in a measure, of his father. These considerations had imposed upon him silence and a certain self-control; still he had an idea

that Kitty could not be altogether unconscious of his love for her. He knew she liked him, and it was his fond hope that he might "drive this liking to the name of love." But so far he had not ventured to voice his hope in words. And now he wondered if her father's return would make a difference, and what her father would think of him and his suit.

"He will think I am not good enough for her," he said to himself, "and of course I'm not. Besides, as she's a great heiress, he will expect her to make some splendid match—and I am only a young barrister with my career just beginning."

All this passed through his mind on hearing Kitty's "good news," which he felt might not be equally good news so far as he was concerned, but he strove to look as happy over it as she was.

"We shall all be very glad to see him," said he to the girl, mendaciously.

"What shall we do with ourselves this afternoon?" asked Kitty, changing the topic. "Now you are here, Gilbert, we must make some use of you."

"He was talking of going on the river," remarked Helen.

"Yes, yes," said Kitty, eagerly. "I never tire of the river."

"Will you come, mother?" inquired Gilbert of Mrs. Eversleigh.

But Mrs. Eversleigh declined on the plea of having some household matters to attend to.

"I can't go with you," she said, "but I'll tell you what to do. You two girls can take your cycles, and Gilbert can borrow his brother Ernest's wheel, and ride to Molesey."

"And get a punt there. The very thing," said Gilbert, in the mood to welcome hard exercise, and so to work off his trouble. "I suppose," he said to his mother, "I'll find some of Ernie's boating things in his room?"

"Oh yes," said Mrs. Eversleigh, and he went off to change his clothes.

Presently the three young people were cycling to Molesey, which they soon reached. A punt was quickly procured, and, in a few seconds more, Gilbert was poling it up-stream with remarkable vigour considering the heat of the day.

"You are working hard," said Kitty, noting his extraordinary exertions.

"Oh, never mind him," sweetly remarked his sister. "It's good for him."

"But won't you over-heat yourself, Gilbert?" asked Kitty. And though he replied with thanks that he was all right, she insisted after a short while that he must take an easy, and moor the punt under a shady bank.

He obeyed her, and then Kitty, to his secret discomfiture, must needs talk about the coming of her father, her heart being full of the subject. And as she talked his trouble seemed to melt away, for she spoke of the happy times they all would have when Morris Thornton was in England, and obviously included Gilbert in her notion of these happy times. The three chatted gaily for an hour, and then they set off down-stream.

They had gone several hundred yards, perhaps, when they met, moving at top speed, a racing-skiff, the occupant of which bowed to them with a rapid inclination of his head, but did not stop.

"It's Harry Bennet," said Helen Eversleigh, gazing after him, and waving her hand.

"How are you, Harry?" Gilbert had shouted, as the boat went past.

Bennet, now some distance away, rested on his oars, and waved his hand to Helen, who was still regarding him, as was also Kitty; but it was the latter at whom he looked. However, he did not seek to talk, but watched the punt until it disappeared round a bend of the stream. His face thereupon expressed mingled feelings—a tremendous admiration of Kitty Thornton, and an intense hatred of Gilbert Eversleigh, whom he proceeded to curse aloud when out of sight, being the chief.

"He's a fine oarsman, a fine athlete," observed Helen, as the punt went on down-stream. She referred to Harry Bennet, whom she had known all her life, and for whom she had a liking. "I can't believe he is the bad lot they say he is. If only he was not so keen on racing and betting! It's said that he is losing all his money and ruining himself. It seems such a pity!" And she sighed.

"Yes," said Kitty, glancing at her friend; but she did not continue the conversation. She knew of Helen's feeling for Bennet, but it was a feeling she herself did not share.

As for Gilbert, he said nothing at all either good or bad about the man whom he understood very well was his rival. But he had heard what was being said about Bennet quite openly, the sum and substance of which was that Harry had become a reckless and inveterate gambler.

The girls had heard something of this too, but only

in the most general way. All three, however, were cognisant of the main facts of Bennet's life: how his father had died when he was a child, and how he had been petted, spoiled, and indulged by a foolish doting mother; how he had consequently grown into a wilful, headstrong, intractable boy; how, as he neared manhood, he showed a gift of marvellous physical strength, in the development of which there for a time lay an illusory hope of his improvement; how, in his first year at the university, he had been a member of the crew which, after a long series of Oxford triumphs, had at last given a victory to the light blues; and how, on coming into his property a few months later, he had forthwith left Cambridge and taken to racing with frantic zest.

"It is such a pity," Helen went on; "but I think that so long as he keeps up his rowing there is a chance for him."

But now they were back at Molesey, and nothing more was said of Bennet at the time. At dinner in the evening, however, Helen spoke of their having seen him on the river, and repeated what she had said about it being a hopeful sign that he kept up his rowing.

"I think he doesn't row very much now," said her brother Ernest, who was a solicitor like his father, and expected soon to be a partner in the Lincoln's Inn firm. "He simply can't have the time. His stable and his horses and his betting-book absorb him entirely. I wonder what that new horse of his—he calls it 'Go Nap'—will do for him. He's sure to back it heavily."

"'Go Nap'!" said Gilbert. "That's rather suggestive of a plunge."

"Isn't it? Harry is a terrific plunger anyway."

"Oh, don't let us talk about Harry Bennet," said

Francis Eversleigh, from the head of the table, where he had been sitting in moody silence. He was so utterly unlike himself, indeed, that his wife was alarmed, but when she asked what ailed him he said he had "a rather bad headache"—a statement which scarcely reassured her, as she knew he never had headaches; and when she pressed him further, he replied sharply and irritably. But the wretched man hardly knew what he was saying or doing.

One part of Silwood's advice he had made up his mind to accept and act upon, and this was that he would do nothing to forestall the fate which must overtake the firm, but to let things drift till the crash came. And, having come to this conclusion, the unfortunate solicitor told himself that he must try to behave as usual in his family circle. But he found it impossible. The tragic swiftness and completeness of the stroke dealt him by Silwood was too much for him. Now, as he thought of his home, and of his wife and children, and of the frightful secret he carried in his breast of the ruin hanging over them, a bitterness worse than that of death possessed him. Generally full of easy agreeable small-talk, that night he was gloomy and dumb.

He made one effort only to talk.

Kitty mentioned having had a letter from her father, whereupon he stated that the firm had also had one from Mr. Thornton.

"By the way," he said, striving to speak in his ordinary tones, "your father made a curious omission in his letter to us; he does not specify when he is coming—gives no precise date. I dare say it was an oversight. I suppose he tells you in your letter just when to expect him, Kitty?"

"No, he doesn't, Mr. Eversleigh—at least, not very precisely. He says he'll come soon after his letter, but he does not fix any date, as he wants to give me a little surprise. Still, I think he'll be here some day next week."

"Next week!" said Eversleigh, slowly and painfully. To him it was the voice of doom, and he relapsed into silence again.

CHAPTER IV

Dinner over, Francis Eversleigh retired to his room, again excusing himself on the plea of headache, adding in a very uncertain voice that he would no doubt be better in the morning; but he looked harassed, worn, and ill. His wife concealed her consternation at his state as well as she could, and mentally tried to assign some cause for it; on reflection she thought that his reference at table to Harry Bennet, whose affairs, now much involved, she knew to be in the hands of the firm, probably suggested the correct explanation. Anxious to minister to her husband, and to find out if possible what distressed him so sorely, she wished to be alone with him, and she urged the others to go out for a stroll by the river.

As the young people, nothing loth, went out, the two brothers exchanged a few words, Gilbert asking Ernest if he knew of anything in the office that had upset their father.

"I saw him in the forenoon," he remarked, "and he was looking as well as could be then. I hope he's not going to have an illness."

"I know of nothing particularly worrying in the office," returned Ernest. "How should there be? I fancy it is just as he says—he's got a bad headache, perhaps from the heat. I don't fancy that there is

anything else the matter with him. He'll be all right to-morrow, you'll see."

Now, when Gilbert was at Surbiton, there was an unwritten law that when they took their walks abroad he should pair off with Kitty, and Ernest with Helen. This arrangement was so well understood that Ernest never thought of even grumbling at it. So Gilbert and Kitty led the way to the terrace or esplanade on that side of the Thames, where they found a sequestered seat. And there they were left by the other two, who walked on towards the waterworks.

It was a delightful summer evening. The air was soft, balmy, sweet; a light breeze whispered delicate suggestions, and wooed to pleasant thoughts and tender fancies; a crescent moon, shining low over the trees on to the water, brought to the scene that touch of sentiment which is the very breath of poetry and romance. It was a night for lovers! Love, passion, sighs, smiles, fond hopes, fervent vows, eloquent prayers, the gentle rain of happy tears—all were in the enchanted atmosphere of the place that night.

It was one of those magical nights on which the heart is likely to be easily and perhaps profoundly stirred, and Gilbert Eversleigh, with the woman he loved by his side, was in a frame of mind to respond only too quickly to its influence. He longed to speak to Kitty, to tell her that he loved her, to ask her to unite her life with his, to press her dear hand, to taste the sweetness of her lips; but he forced himself to silence, though the restraint he imposed on his desire for utterance made it but gain the greater strength.

It may be that Kitty suspected she was on the edge of a crisis, for she too was quiet, and for the first

time in her life somehow felt shy with Gilbert. Of course she did not require any one to tell her that he loved her, and more than once she had asked herself if she loved him, and she had answered "Yes." Thus, though words of love had never passed between them, she was none the less conscious of the existence of their love. And this made life joy, even if there was at the back of her mind a tremulous maidenly sensitiveness which made her half afraid of her happiness. An instinct of reserve now warned her to say or do nothing which could be taken by Gilbert as an opening.

Therefore a sort of constraint fell upon them, but still there was a sweetness about it; for was there not a nearness and an intimacy in the dreamy brooding silence, the outward sign of this constraint, which was only possible between true lovers?

And thus they sat for some minutes, apart and yet together.

It was Kitty herself who spoke first. Her thought of Gilbert associated itself with that other subject about which she was also so glad—the coming of her father, and it was of him she spoke.

"Do you remember my father, Gilbert?" she asked.

"Perfectly," replied Gilbert. "I had just come back from school for the last time, and—he was very kind to me. Of course, I remember him quite well. And—and—it was then that he brought you to our house."

"That was seven years ago," said Kitty. "Seven years! I haven't seen him for all these years. I wonder if he is much changed? He will see a great change in me. I was only a girl, a little girl, then, and now I am a woman."

As she uttered the last words she glanced a little apprehensively at her companion, for she felt she had perhaps given him an opportunity. She saw his face was clouded; his eyes were fixed on a point in the distance, and he did not speak.

"Your father's return," at length said he, with a sigh, "will make a difference, I fear."

"In what way?" inquired Kitty, not at once following hard on the track of what was passing in his mind.

"He will take you from us," said Gilbert; and then he added, inconsequently and involuntarily, "I wonder if he will like me?"

And the girl now understood.

"Like you! Of course he will," she exclaimed, in a tone which made him proud and happy.

There was an emphasis in her voice which seemed to assert that it would be impossible for her father to criticise him—at all events adversely.

"It would mean so much to me," he exclaimed, turning towards her.

Kitty stole a glance at him, and she observed that his face was no longer clouded, but bore a grave, questioning expression like that of a man in doubt with regard to some deeply serious matter.

"It would mean all the world to me," he said, meeting her glance.

"Why?" rose to Kitty's lips, but the words went no further. For as Gilbert kept his gaze fastened upon her, a subtle change was worked in his eyes; they were no longer shaded with doubt or anxious inquiry; they searched and challenged her with passionate appeal; they unmistakably asked the question of questions man can put to woman.

And though no sound passed Kitty Thornton's lips, she made no pretence of misunderstanding him. All the woman in her instantaneously rose up in quick response. All the love in her heart suddenly surged up in a great wave of feeling which flooded her eyes, now deep pools of light, with an unmistakable answer to the unmistakable question in his, thus bent upon her. Yet she trembled slightly, for she felt herself in the grasp of something new and strange and delightful, but just a little terrible and alarming.

And when Gilbert Eversleigh saw what he saw in Kitty's eyes, self-control became impossible, and he could restrain himself no longer.

"Kitty, Kitty," he said, in a deep earnest voice which thrilled the girl as she listened—"Kitty, my darling, I love you, I love you!"

Kitty trembled still more, and lowered her eyes shyly—perhaps to hide the light that glowed in them.

"Kitty," he said, his voice somewhat uncertain for an instant as he looked at her downcast face—"Kitty, my dear, you must know that I love you. Now that I have said it, I should like to go on for ever saying 'I love you, I love you!' You are everything to me—everything to me," he repeated, with a lover's fond iteration. "Oh, my dear, tell me that you love me!"

Kitty raised her eyes.

"Listen to me a moment, Kitty," said Gilbert, who had seen the message she flashed to him, and was greatly encouraged thereby. "Let me tell you all that is in my heart."

The girl now looked at him, some wonder in her glance, as she asked herself if he had not said already

all that was in his heart, but as he went on she saw what he meant.

"I love you better than life," he began, "but I am not sure that I have done right in saying to you what I have said. I had not intended—— I was carried away . . ." And he paused.

"What is it?" asked Kitty, and there was such childlike trust and innocence in the way she made this inquiry that he had to put strong compulsion on himself to keep from placing his arm round her waist and drawing her toward him.

"You have spoken two or three times to-day about your father," replied Gilbert, "and each time you gave me, without knowing it, a pang, because, Kitty dear, I am afraid that he may not think me good enough for you, not rich enough, not placed high enough, for you. I had intended to wait until he came before speaking to you—I suppose I ought to have asked his permission to address you first. Do you see, Kitty? But to-night—well, I found I could wait no longer, and so must tell you all that was in my heart. Your father may blame me, Kitty. He might say that you should see far more of life than you have before even thinking of marriage. Yet, Kitty, after all it rests with you. Kitty, Kitty, what do you say, my darling? I cannot help loving you—I can never cease to love you. Tell me, do you love me? Say you love me!"

And he put forth his hand with a gesture of entreaty.

Long before this Kitty's shyness had fallen from her, her maidenly hesitation had disappeared. She had a feeling that Gilbert Eversleigh had been foreordained her lover before the foundations of the earth

were laid—so vast was the certainty that filled her mind. The very statement of the difficulty in which he found himself with regard to her father helped her inevitably to this conclusion. It was noble of him, she thought, to take this attitude, and if he had not been able to stick to it, was she the one to condemn him for it? No, indeed.

"You are more to me, Gilbert," she said, quietly but firmly, "than my father—than all the fathers in the world. You are everything to me, just as I am everything to you."

As she spoke, she inclined towards him with a beautiful movement of surrender and invitation.

He caught her in his arms and strained her yielding form in his embrace; their lips met and met again; a sweet agitation which grew into an ecstasy possessed them both; they seemed to reach and stand on a pinnacle of brightness and delight far removed from the grey levels on which moved ordinary men and women through the shadows of life; they murmured to each other the sweet foolish things that lovers always murmur, and in their ears never was diviner music.

And as for Morris Thornton—why, Kitty said that he would be proud of Gilbert, and the very first thing she would do on his arrival would be to tell him that she was engaged.

"Of course," added Kitty, "he will be pleased, because I am pleased."

"Are you still here?" asked Ernest Eversleigh, who with his sister now walked up to the bench where the lovers were sitting. "We thought you were coming on after us, and we waited for you for some time, but as you did not turn up we came back again."

And thus were the lovers brought down to the every-day world.

"Is it time to go in?" asked Gilbert, who was unamiably wishing his brother at Jericho.

"I should think it is—particularly if you intend to catch a train to town to-night," replied Ernest.

"Let us go in," said Kitty, rising from the seat and linking her arm with that of Helen, somewhat to Gilbert's astonishment, until it occurred to him that she might wish to tell the other girl what had happened.

The party—the girls first, the brothers in the rear—now returned to Ivydene, where on their entrance into the house they encountered Francis Eversleigh, looking haggard and ghastly; he had felt too unutterably wretched to stay in his room where his wife in vain sought to tend and soothe him, and had come downstairs to see if he could not find some distraction.

Gilbert moved up to Kitty's side, and, as the two stood together, their faces were tell-tale.

"Father," said Gilbert, blushing furiously, "Kitty has promised to be my wife."

Helen Eversleigh rushed forward and threw her arms round Kitty's neck, exclaiming, "Oh, you dear!" while Ernest warmly shook his brother's hand, but their father stood stock-still. He tried to speak, but the words were choked in his throat. Again he essayed to say something, but could not. With a groan he suddenly turned from them and fled upstairs.

"Father!" exclaimed Gilbert, calling after him. "What can be the matter with him, I wonder?" he said to Ernest, who merely answered that he could not tell.

And then the two lovers looked at each other. They

both felt that Francis Eversleigh had behaved very strangely.

"I'm afraid Mr. Eversleigh is not at all well," said Kitty. "I am so sorry."

"Yes, father must be ill," agreed Gilbert; "still, I think it can't be anything very serious. And now, I suppose I must go," he added with a sigh.

The lovers bade each other good-bye in the porch. Absorbed in their happiness, they thought no more of Francis Eversleigh.

And when Gilbert spent the following day, which was a Sunday, at Surbiton, it was only to be expected that the lovers, after the immemorial manner of lovers, should concern themselves with themselves and their own affairs.

Francis Eversleigh remained in his room the whole day; he could not bear to see any one.

CHAPTER V

On the Monday morning Francis Eversleigh did not appear at breakfast.

Mrs. Eversleigh told Ernest that his father was asleep after having passed a wakeful night, and she was sure he would not feel equal to going to the office. When Ernest inquired, as was natural, if she intended sending for a doctor, she replied that a suggestion she had made in the night to that effect had been peremptorily negatived by her husband, who maintained that he was suffering from a slight attack for which it was absurd to call in a physician.

"I am very anxious, however, about him," she said. She paused and looked meditatively at her son. "Do you know, Ernest," she continued, "if your father has on hand some exceptionally difficult business just now, or if there is some client who is giving him cause for unusual anxiety?" She was thinking of Bennet.

"I am quite certain there is absolutely nothing of such gravity as to make him ill," replied Ernest, with conviction. "Why, work goes on at the office from day to day and from month to month with the ease and regularity of machinery. But why do you ask this, mother?"

"Because it has occurred to me that there is

something on your father's mind, and it is that which is making him ill."

"Indeed! Oh, I think you must be mistaken, mother."

"I hope so," she rejoined, but not in a really hopeful tone. "One of the things which perplex me is that he seems to take very little pleasure in the engagement of Kitty and Gilbert—that is strange, is it not? Then again, you would suppose he would be looking forward with interest to seeing his old friend Morris Thornton once more, yet, when I referred to it, he spoke in such a queer way. I can't understand him at all."

As Ernest was about to speak Miss Kitty Thornton entered the room, and conversation passed to other topics. And as for Kitty herself, her brilliant beauty appeared to have been enhanced by the happy event of her engagement, for never had she looked so lovely as she did that morning, and there was on her face a light of happiness which was good to see.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Ernest asked Kitty. "Can I carry a message, for instance," he went on, with a grin, rising to leave the room, "to a certain barrister in the Temple?"

But Miss Kitty merely smiled and shook her pretty head.

"I won't have her teased," said Mrs. Eversleigh; but the offender had already vanished.

When Silwood reached his room in New Square he found not only Williamson waiting as usual, but also Ernest Eversleigh.

"I am sorry to have to tell you," said Ernest, "that my father is indisposed. He will not be here to-day."

"Mr. Eversleigh ill!" exclaimed Silwood, and

stopped; inwardly he termed Eversleigh a poor weak fool without a particle of grit. Aloud he said, clicking out the words stiffly, "I am very sorry to hear it. What is the trouble?"

"I don't think it is anything serious; he'll be all right by to-morrow."

"He did not send me any message?"

"He was asleep when I left the house. Mother told me he had been awake most of the night, but had dozed off towards morning."

"I see. There was something I expected to hear from him, but it's possible you can tell me. It's just this. We received a letter on Saturday from Mr. Morris Thornton, in which he informed us that he was leaving Canada for England. Well, though he spoke of being here very soon, he did not give us any exact date. Of course, it is no great matter, but it seems just a little curious."

"It must have been an oversight," said Williamson.

"Perhaps so," assented Silwood.

"I am not certain of that," remarked Ernest.

"You have heard something?" queried Silwood.

"Miss Thornton has heard from her father——"

"I had an idea she might have definite word as to the date of her father's arrival," interposed Silwood. "Not, as I told you before, that it matters; it is only that one likes to satisfy one's curiosity sometimes."

Thus carefully did Silwood minimize the interest he took in the date of Thornton's arrival in London. Certainly, Ernest Eversleigh had no suspicion of the vital importance the subject possessed, and Silwood's manner was so natural that even Williamson was put off the scent.

"Miss Thornton," said Ernest, "had a letter also on Saturday; but her father did not specify the date of his coming to her either, the reason being, he told her, that he wishes to give her a pleasant surprise by dropping in on her when she isn't expecting him. Still, he said enough to make her expect him some day next week."

"Some day next week!" repeated Silwood, with an indrawing of the breath. Then he continued in an ordinary tone, "He wishes to give her a surprise; that seems to me rather odd."

"It is," agreed Ernest; and then he smiled.

"There is something more," suggested Silwood, seeing the smile.

"I was thinking," rejoined Ernest, laughing a little, "that the surprise will not be all on one side. Miss Kitty has prepared a surprise for him too."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. Kitty and Gilbert are engaged to be married."

"Oh! Since when?"

"Saturday night. I wonder what Mr. Thornton will say about it!"

"I wonder!" echoed Silwood; but this subject did not concern him greatly, and he turned to his letters.

Ernest took the hint, and left Silwood with Williamson. After a short talk about current business, Silwood sent away the head-clerk, having given him instructions to attend to any urgent matter in Francis Eversleigh's department which required immediate attention.

"So Morris Thornton comes next week," he said to

himself when alone—"next week—next week. The time is short—very short—and there is much to do."

Silwood, to all appearance, went on with his work as usual, but in reality he was thinking out the situation. What, he asked, did Francis Eversleigh mean by absenting himself from the office—the plea of illness was transparently absurd; and did he intend to go on absenting himself? That could not be allowed, thought Silwood; it would never do. And Thornton was to be in London next week! Silwood, therefore, resolved to go to Surbiton that afternoon to see Eversleigh.

His resolve did not need any strengthening, but something occurred which would have supplied it had it been required.

This was the receipt of a telegram from Harry Bennet, telling the firm that he had passed a demand draft on it for two thousand pounds.

Silwood, having explained to Ernest that he particularly wished to see his father, not only to see how he was, but also to consult him with respect to Bennet's affairs, accompanied the young man to Ivydene.

Silwood had not seen Francis Eversleigh since he had made his confession to him on the Saturday forenoon, and even his phlegm was disturbed by the change worked in twenty-four hours on Francis, who looked broken and seriously ill. The meeting was an intensely painful one to Eversleigh; indeed, he thought at first of declining to see Silwood, but changed his mind.

Silwood saw Eversleigh in the latter's bedroom.

"Francis," said he, in a stiff, formal tone, "I am very sorry to see you like this. You take things too much to heart. It's a bad blow, I know—a terrible

blow. I can't tell you how bitterly I regret what I've done—how I repent of it."

Eversleigh looked at him strangely. Ever since Silwood had confessed his guilt there had been moments when Eversleigh felt he could murder Silwood. And now that Silwood was before him, he fiercely asked himself why he should not kill like a rat this man whom he had trusted so implicitly, and who had betrayed that trust so shamefully. Did the man not deserve death? Was anything too bad for him? And these questions were in his eyes as they fixed themselves on Silwood.

"I don't suppose you came here," he said, in a strained voice that had a curious hissing sound about it, "to tell me this."

"To tell you this, Frank," observed Silwood, meeting fully the other's gaze, "and other things too."

"What other things?" he asked hoarsely, glancing away from Silwood. Already his impulse of murder was passing away from his wavering mind; he was telling himself that if he killed Silwood the lot of his wife and family would only be the more desperate.

Silwood all the while was regarding him intently. He was trying to read Eversleigh's mind, and he came to the conclusion that Eversleigh was capable of committing suicide or some other rash act.

"Before speaking of these, Frank," replied Silwood, "let me beg of you not to fret too much. What is the use of dwelling on what is past and cannot now be mended?"

"How can I help it?"

"You must try. For one thing, you must come to the office. It is surely better to attend to your work at the office——"

"To attend to my work!" broke in Eversleigh. "How can I, when all my thoughts are centred on one thing—the ruin that is coming upon me and those innocent ones who must suffer? To attend to my work is impossible!"

"Surely not."

"You know—no one better—that for years I have never attended to my work properly. Do not think that I consider myself free from blame. I ought never to have allowed you to get control of the whole finances of the firm. It was my duty to have made inquiry, and to have seen that everything belonging to our clients was in perfect order. I have been criminally neglectful—I see that very clearly;" and as he spoke his own condemnation there was a sob in his throat.

"Yes; but how does all this prevent you from coming to the office? Is it not just the other way? And for a short time there is no reason to be afraid. What we have to dread most is the coming of Morris Thornton, and that, I hear, will not be till some time next week. That gives us a little breathing-space."

"Till some time next week!" said Eversleigh. "That's not much of a respite."

"Still, it's something. But there is another thing I have to tell you."

"What's that?" dully asked Eversleigh, telling himself that at any rate he knew the worst.

"We got a telegram from Bennet saying he was drawing on us for two thousand pounds."

"Well, can't we pay it?"

"Certainly; but it is inconvenient. The withdrawal of this sum from our bank account seriously reduces our balance."

"What is our balance?"

"About six thousand. With care, and if it were not for the coming of Thornton, we might be able to carry on for a long time."

"I have been thinking over our affairs," said Eversleigh, "since you spoke to me yesterday, and it seems to me we ought to call in a first-class accountant to make a thorough investigation."

"And what would be the inevitable result?" asked Silwood, drily.

"We should know—I should know—how we stand."

"But I know quite well."

"I suppose so. What is the amount of your—of our, I suppose I must say—defalcations?"

"About four hundred thousand. That would be a nice thing for an accountant to discover, to certify to! No, Francis, it is absurd to call in an accountant. It would not be long before he found out we were insolvent, and—defaulters. What service would that be to you or to the firm? None whatever."

"No, perhaps it would not do," acquiesced Eversleigh, weakly. "You said four hundred thousand. How could you have been such a fool as to lose so much money? Four hundred thousand!"

"I was a fool, Frank. But it's easy enough for a wise man to lose more than that on the Stock Exchange."

"Well," sighed Eversleigh, hopelessly, "I don't know what's to be done."

"Why, nothing at present. And perhaps, Francis, your personal position is not so bad. Ernest told me of the engagement of Miss Thornton to Gilbert. That, surely, is an excellent thing for you. When her father finds out the state of affairs he will be silent. He will

certainly not care to prosecute the father of his daughter's accepted husband, will he?"

"He will insist on the engagement being broken off."

"Perhaps, but perhaps not. Leaving that aside, have you thought of the scheme I mentioned——?"

"Yes, yes; I have considered it," replied Eversleigh; then he looked at Silwood wonderingly, and said, "You take our position—my position—very coolly, Cooper. One would think you had no real conception of what you have done."

"Well," rejoined Silwood, hardily, "you see, it is all new to you, Francis, but it is no novelty to me. I have been familiar with our position for a long time—for years. But this is quite beside the point. Let us come to business. Do you intend to adopt my scheme?"

"I do not," said Eversleigh, firmly. "It is preposterous."

"If you will be advised by me——"

"Not in this," Eversleigh cried excitedly, "not in this. Would to God I had never been born!" he exclaimed. And he begged Silwood to leave him, promising to be at the office, however, next day.

As Silwood travelled back to town there was a singular and enigmatic expression on his face; he was thinking that Eversleigh's consent to what he had proposed was not essential, and, this being so, that he would act alone.

CHAPTER VI

Francis Eversleigh returned to the office in Lincoln's Inn next day, and strove to take up his work again, but with indifferent success; the shadow of his impending ruin never lifted itself from his mind. On the other hand, Cooper Silwood, having determined to act alone, began to make preparations for carrying out his scheme.

All that day Silwood was incessantly occupied with the ordinary business of that department of the office which was his special care. No man could have told from his aspect, or from the manner in which he did his business, that anything pressed heavily upon him; he seemed in no way different from the imperturbable, shrewd, capable lawyer people believed him always to be. But what he purposed doing was never absent from his thoughts.

According to custom, at six o'clock Williamson brought him the letters for signature. This signing of the letters served as a sort of signal, for shortly afterwards the clerks left and the office was closed, though it was not an uncommon thing for Silwood to stay on by himself for another hour or two. The Eversleighs went earlier in order to catch the fast five-o'clock suburban train.

At six o'clock Williamson went into Silwood's

room with the letters; he placed them silently before his master, who read them over rapidly, and then affixed the firm's signature in his careful, small handwriting. Williamson stood waiting, while he tried to read his master's face, but Silwood's air was perfectly inscrutable.

"I shall not go at once," said Silwood. "I have not quite finished; but there is no need for any one to stay."

He gathered the letters together in a bunch, and passed them on to Williamson.

"By the way," he asked, looking at the clerk with a sharp glance, "how does Mr. Eversleigh strike you? I'm afraid he's not very well."

"I thought he seemed poorly—very poorly," replied Williamson. "I felt very sorry for him, and I ventured to suggest—having been with the firm so many years, sir—to him that he needed a holiday."

"You did! That was good. It's my own idea, too. And what did he say?"

"He said he was all right, or soon would be; there was nothing much the matter with him. Said it was the heat."

"But about taking a holiday?"

"He said it was not at all necessary."

"Well, I agree with you, Mr. Williamson. It seems to me that he does need a change. I told him that also. I urged him to take a month off, but he won't hear of it. He keeps on saying he is not ill really—only a bit out of sorts owing to the hot weather. And it is hot, isn't it? I must confess I feel this frightful heat very much; the office is horribly close. Unless the weather becomes cooler, I declare I shall

require a holiday myself. And if Mr. Eversleigh still persists in refusing a holiday—well, I believe I shall take one. I haven't had a real vacation for a very long time. But I had much rather he went."

"You certainly have had no holiday, Mr. Silwood, for a long time—three or four years, it must be," said Williamson, immensely surprised at the turn the conversation had taken. "When would you think of going, sir?"

"Oh, I haven't thought much about it all," replied Silwood; "my taking a holiday is only a possibility. Still, if this heat does not moderate, I should not wonder if I did go. But it's not settled."

"I understand, sir," said Williamson, who, as a matter of fact, was completely mystified. "What's up now?" he asked himself. Still, on reflection, he had to admit there was no reason why Silwood should not take a holiday if he wished to do so.

"That's all, I think," said Silwood; and with a nod he dismissed the head-clerk.

Silwood waited for half an hour, so as to allow plenty of time for all the clerks to have left the office, and then he took a look into the various rooms to see if there was any one still there; but they were all empty. Satisfied on this point, he returned to his own room and shut himself in.

Next he went to the large japanned box in the corner, touched the concealed spring, and laid open the secret chamber, from which he took a number of papers, including the sheet of figures against which were placed initials. He pored over these papers, studying them with the intentness of one who is committing a subject to memory. He made two or three

alterations in the figures, and then put all the documents back in their hiding-place. He tried to close up the chamber, but the spring would not work properly. He tried again and again, but he did not succeed.

With each failure his manner showed a rapidly rising agitation, an increasing apprehension, his usual impassivity dropping away from him completely. He examined the mechanism of the arrangement, but he could find nothing wrong with it; so far as he could see, it appeared to be in perfect order. As he struggled with it, his pale face became extraordinarily livid, his lips twitched convulsively, the perspiration stood in beads on his forehead. For he knew that if the box would not shut, then his scheme would tumble to pieces.

He had almost given it up in despair when the accidental pressure of his knee against one of the sides of the box caused the spring to act, and the opening suddenly closed up of itself.

Trembling and gasping, Silwood sat down and looked at the box as if it were some hateful living thing.

"It ought to be seen to," he said to himself, "but I cannot permit any one to touch it. No one but myself must know of the secret chamber—that is vital. And yet—no, I must run the risk."

He went on looking darkly at the box.

"Oh, what a fright you gave me!" he said aloud to it, and then glanced about fearfully at the sound of his own voice. "How absurd!" he said to himself, reassuringly. "I must not let the thing get on my nerves like this."

It was now not far from eight o'clock, which was the hour for Silwood's dinner. In a few minutes more, therefore, he betook himself to the restaurant in Holborn

which he was in the habit of patronizing. A little after nine he walked back to Lincoln's Inn, which he entered by the small door at the side of the fine gateway opening into Lincoln's Inn Fields. He spoke to the porter for some seconds, and then went on to his private chambers in Stone Buildings, his rooms being on the top floor of the north-east corner building overlooking Chancery Lane. He had lived here for several years.

After he had let himself in he locked the door, filled a black clay pipe and lit it, took an armchair and sat down. And there he sat for a long while very still and quiet, save for the puff—puff—puffing of the smoke from his lips. The pipe burnt itself out, and he looked at his watch.

"It is too soon," he said to himself; and he filled a second black clay pipe. And this too he smoked out.

With a leisurely movement he at length rose and went to the window, threw up the sash, and peered out into the half-darkness of the street. He ran his eye up and down Chancery Lane, and noted that all the lights except the street-lamps were out, and that the pavements were bare of human forms, save for one or two dark-flitting, shadowy beings.

"It will soon be time," he thought; and he closed the window.

He sat down again, and proceeded to smoke a third pipe. All the while he had been going over the details of his scheme; now he was thinking whether he had not been too abrupt in making the suggestion that he might take a holiday to Williamson.

"What does it matter?" he concluded; "he knows nothing."

He smoked on until twelve boomed through the

air—the strokes came in a great volume of sound from the clocks in the Strand and from far and near. When it had died away, he put down his pipe, and walked into his bedroom.

But it was not to go to bed.

For, a few minutes later, a figure emerged from Cooper Silwood's bedroom—the figure of a man of the height and general build of Cooper Silwood, but otherwise not like him in the least. Yet it was he, though changed beyond recognition.

His mien was that of a respectable workman in his everyday clothes. They were such clothes as might be worn by men of half a dozen different trades with equal appropriateness, so little distinctive of any one trade were they, and yet they stamped themselves unmistakably as a workman's clothes. Silwood wore them like one who was thoroughly at home in them; he moved at ease in them. To all appearance he was a workman, and from his bearing it might be guessed that the part he was playing was no new one. To be in this disguise was no novelty to him.

That it was no new *rôle* for him to assume was also manifest from the skill and success with which his face was made up. To begin with, the heavy brown wig he usually had on his head had disappeared, and he was now quite bald, with the exception of a narrow fringe of dark-grey hair round the base of the skull. He was no longer clean-shaven; an untidy blackish moustache covered his upper lip. A dark line had been pencilled on either side of his nose, these lines alone imparting to the face a marvellous change in its expression. Besides, the skin of the face had been slightly stained, as had also been that of the hands.

His disguise was absolute. His own mother, as the phrase goes, would not have known him. He looked to the life the part he was playing. Mr. Cooper Silwood, the eminent solicitor, had disappeared, and a sober, respectable workman had taken his place.

Could Francis Eversleigh now have seen this partner of his he would have had much food for thought; if he could have followed him he would have had much more.

The night was now very still—the roar of London was hushed. Silwood opened his door gently, and listened. The stairs were lit, but no sound came from any of the chambers. Locking his door softly, he stole down into the court of Stone Buildings; they, too, were wrapped in silence. For a moment he stood still and strained his ears to catch the slightest noise, but there was not a breath. Taking from his pocket a key, he unlocked a small iron gate at the north-east corner of the court, and passed through it and went along a short narrow footway closed on the Chancery Lane side by another iron gate, which he opened, and so reached Chancery Lane. All this he did without hurry or confusion. It was plain that he had got out of Lincoln's Inn by this footway many times before. Yet it was believed to be shut up every evening by the porter, who was supposed to be the only person possessing the keys of the gates.

From this footway—which is not much used even in the day-time, and is hardly to be noticed at all in the night-time—to Holborn is but a step. Silwood found Chancery Lane deserted; no one saw him emerge from the Inn. He was quickly in Holborn, and set out eastwards at a rapid pace. And on he went, mile after

mile, stepping out briskly, through the city proper, and on, on beyond it until he reached one of the great districts of East-End London, where in small humble houses, huddled together in a wilderness of mean streets, thousands upon thousands live out their obscure and uneventful lives.

Silwood went on like a man who knows his way well. Never once did he pause until he reached the end of his journey. He halted at a door in Douglas Street, Stepney, and knocked a peculiar knock. Two or three minutes passed, and then a light was shown at the window, whereupon Silwood knocked in the same way a second time.

"Is it you, James?" asked a woman's voice, as the door was partially opened.

"Yes, Meg; let me in," said Silwood.

"I did not expect you," she said, while Silwood embraced her affectionately. "Is anything the matter?"

The woman who put the question was a plump, personable woman of about forty, with kindly brown eyes and a tender mouth. She loved but was rather afraid of this man, who yet was always good and kind to her. But he had told her very little about himself. She knew he was engaged in some mysterious business which necessitated long absences from her, and the wearing of a disguise; she had tried to guess the nature of his business, and had come to the conclusion that it was some kind of secret police work.

Any romance there was in Silwood's life was connected with this woman, of whom he was sincerely fond, though he was still fonder of their child. Some years before, an accident one evening in the street led to his meeting her, and he took a fancy to her. The

thing jumping well with other things he followed her up and married her, though he was careful not to let her know who he was.

When with her and the child Silwood was another man; he seemed to have shed like a skin the cold formality which characterized him in Lincoln's Inn; his very nature appeared changed.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked.

"No, Meg, though there's news. But how is Davy?"

"Poor lamb! He's as usual. He's asleep just now."

"Let me see him," said Silwood.

They went into a bedroom, and in a cot was their child. The boy was a cripple—he had been born a cripple, and the parents were all the more attached to him on that account. There is no explaining the workings of human nature; Silwood, who had confessed himself a criminal to his partner, Eversleigh, was deeply attached to the boy. He now gazed at the sleeping child, and the love that shone in his eyes was as pure as an angel's.

"Poor lad! dear lad!" he said, and there were tears in his voice.

Then the father and mother tip-toed out of the room.

"You said there was news, James," suggested the wife.

"Yes, I think you won't live here much longer. My business will take me abroad, and I dare say I will by-and-by—it may be very soon—send for you. I may be away from England for a long time."

"Away from England!" she murmured. "Oh, James! Where is it you are going?"

"I don't know," he answered; "I am not quite sure yet. I'll let you know in a few days, and meanwhile I want you to get ready, so that you can travel at a minute's notice."

"Yes, James; it's rather sudden, but I'll do what you tell me."

"Now I must leave you," he said.

She was accustomed to these abrupt partings, but as he was going she hung upon his neck while he kissed her repeatedly.

The following day he was at his office at half-past ten, looking as if it were impossible for such a man as he to lead a double life.

CHAPTER VII

The day on which Harry Bennet wired that he had drawn on Eversleigh, Silwood and Eversleigh, for two thousand pounds, was the first day of the Goodwood meeting.

Bennet was a man who lost and won large sums on the turf, and it was not in the least unusual for him to wager several thousands on a single event, especially if it were one of the greater races. With him betting was a disease, a mania, so strong and uncontrolled ran the gambling fever in his blood.

His love for Kitty Thornton was genuine, but it had to take a second place to this appalling madness.

When he saw her and Helen and Gilbert Eversleigh in the punt on the river, he told himself as he rowed up-stream that he must lose no time in declaring himself to the girl. He cursed Gilbert in his thoughts, but believed his chance was at least as good as his rival's. And if it had not been for some racing business he was compelled to attend to that evening, he would have gone to Ivydene. If he had, the probability is that Kitty and Gilbert would not have been left alone that night under the white magic of the moon, and their engagement would not have taken place—at least, not at that particular time.

If he had gone to Ivydene that evening it is more than possible that the life-current of their lives would have changed its course.

In any case, that evening of fate passed, and next day, being the opening at Goodwood, saw Harry on the course plunging wildly and losing heavily. Nor had he any luck that afternoon—hence the draft for two thousand on the solicitors, after he had exhausted his ready money.

The second day at Goodwood brought him a little better fortune, and he came out of it without positive disaster. It was not necessary to call for more funds.

In the first race on the third day his own horse, Go Nap, ran. It was known that the animal had done fairly well in its trials, and there was a good deal of outside money on it. Harry, of course, backed it. Go Nap won handsomely, and from that moment Harry's luck changed. Plunging more recklessly than ever, he more than succeeded in recovering himself. At the end of the day he was a heavy winner.

He made his biggest coup on a horse which lost. Harry had laid against it, although it was a hot favourite. It should have won on its form quite easily, everybody said, and there were rumours of foul play. An investigation was talked of and eventually was held, but nothing came of it. The impression, however, was that there had been some "crooked work" in the matter. None was more forward in denying it than Bennet. Fortunately for him, it was not known that he had won a large sum, or there might have been suspicions of his good faith. And presently the disputings, the angry arguments, the murmurings, the

bickerings, died away, but what had happened was not forgotten.

On the fourth day of the meeting Bennet was again a winner, though the total of his gains was not so great as that of the day before. Taken altogether, however, it had been an excellent Goodwood for him, and he was correspondingly elated.

His home was at Hampton Court, and he returned to it in high feather. The first thing he did next morning was to go to Ivydene. He had made up his mind to speak to Kitty of his passion, and to ask her to be his wife. Being away at the races he had not heard of her engagement, and intoxicated with his success at Goodwood he felt himself a conquering hero, who had only to come, and be seen, to triumph instantly.

He found Kitty at home and alone, nor did the maiden seem displeased to see him. She had no suspicion, however, of the nature of his errand.

He was so full of his good fortune at the races, that, as soon as the customary greetings were over, he forthwith launched out into the story of his four days' campaign. Kitty had a pretty natural gift of listening sympathetically, and the young man was greatly pleased with the interest she manifested in his narrative—so much so that his spirit glowed within him. And, of course, Kitty congratulated him on the victory of his horse, Go Nap, and on his other successes.

As he looked at the beautiful girl, a strong desire came upon him to speak to her at once of his passion, but a certain novel bashfulness, arising from the very reality of the love he felt for her, restrained him at the

moment. Instead of going to the point at once, he began by asking in the most banal fashion if she had any news.

Now, Kitty had two great pieces of news—one of them a very great piece of news indeed; one was the coming of her father, the other her engagement to Gilbert Eversleigh. It was of the first she chose to speak.

"News? Yes," said Kitty, eagerly, "great news. Have you heard that my father is expected here from Canada next week?—but, perhaps, you have heard of it."

"No, I have not heard of it. Rather sudden, is it not?" asked Bennet. "You did not know of it, I think, Miss Kitty, when I saw you some days ago."

"I had a letter from my father the very next morning."

"He arrives next week, you say? On what day do you look for him?"

"That I can't tell you, for he has not mentioned any fixed day; but he will be here very soon. And, oh! I shall be glad to see him!"

"Yes. It will be a great pleasure to you to see him again."

"It will make me very happy," said Kitty, simply, who was now counting the days and finding them somewhat long.

While the girl was speaking, Bennet was thinking that it would be better for him to declare himself before the arrival of her father. Did he put it off till afterwards, it was probable that Morris Thornton would make some inquiries about him—in which case

his infatuation for betting and horse-racing would be bound to come out, and Thornton might take a severe view of his conduct. But the matter would appear in a different light if he were engaged to Kitty before her father's appearance on the scene.

They had been sitting in the drawing-room of Ivydene quite near each other. Suddenly, to Kitty's surprise, Bennet rose, and with outstretched hands stood in front of her. He gave her no time to check him—his words flowed like a torrent.

"Miss Kitty, your father will make you happy; will you not make me happy too? You can make me the happiest of men. I love you, you darling Kitty! Tell me that you do not regard me with indifference! Tell me that you will not refuse my love, Kitty! Do not send me away from your sweet presence. I love you, I adore you for your beauty, for your sweetness, for yourself. Kitty, do you love me? I will do anything and everything a man can to show you I love you. Kitty, dearest, tell me——"

Springing a step forward, he tried to clasp her in his arms, but she retreated and then waved him back.

Bennet had spoken well, and with a rough sincerity which the girl could not but feel. She tried to stop him, but he would not be stopped. As he had gone on, her face had paled and her eyes had grown full of trouble and distress. She now blamed herself for not putting her second piece of news before the other. Trouble and distress also showed themselves in the agitation with which she replied to him.

"Harry, I'm so sorry. What you ask is impossible!"

"Impossible! You don't mean it, Kitty, surely," exclaimed Bennet. "Oh, say you don't mean it!"

He was so cocksure of himself and of her that he could not believe she was in earnest. His self-confidence was so great that it blinded him, otherwise he must have seen that she had no such answer to give him as he wished.

"Yes, it is impossible," she said, quietly and firmly. "I am very sorry to pain you, Harry, very sorry indeed; you may be quite sure of that."

The young man's eyes filled with an angry light while the hot colour flushed his cheeks.

"It is your love I want, not your sorrow," he said roughly.

"That I cannot give you," said Kitty. "Wait a moment, Harry. A few minutes ago you asked me if I had any news. Well, I did not tell you all the news. There was one piece of news I felt a certain reticence about. I wish now I had mentioned it to you. For, if I had done so you would not have said—what you have said. It is that I am engaged to be married."

"Oh, Kitty!" cried Bennet, in a voice that seemed to ask her how she dared become engaged to any one but himself. "You are engaged! This is news indeed . . . I wish I had known . . . engaged!" And Bennet, who was not able to contain his rage and mortification, glowered at the girl, as these words came brokenly from him. Then he looked at her for some seconds in silence, and his look was not pleasant.

"I am sorry," said Kitty once more, but her accent was cold. She thought he was not behaving prettily, and that it was time for him to go.

"May I ask who is the lucky man?" he inquired,

his face dark with wrath; but in his heart he had already guessed that Gilbert Eversleigh was his successful rival.

"I do not know that you have any right to address me as you are doing," said Kitty with dignity. "You asked a question and you have had your answer." But as she looked at Bennet she relented a little. "I am sorry to disappoint you, Harry," she went on, "but there is nothing more to be said."

"I suppose it is Gilbert," said Bennet.

Kitty nodded assent.

Bennet gazed at her gloomily; there was something threatening in the black gleams he shot at her.

"Have you no good wishes for me?" she asked, making an effort to remind him that he should at least try to play the part of a gentleman.

But Bennet only glared at her speechlessly.

At length, muttering some words so incoherently that the girl could not catch them, he turned and left the room abruptly.

And he kept muttering the same words over and over again as he returned to his home; they made an infernal chorus in his thoughts, the burden of which was, "She shall never marry you, Master Gilbert, never, never, if I can prevent her. She shall marry me, me, me, nobody but me." And yet, even while he kept on saying this to himself, he could not conceal from his innermost soul that he was powerless. Kitty and Gilbert were engaged; there was the bitter fact. Still, he whispered in his heart, they were not married, and until Kitty was actually united to Gilbert there was always room for a little hope.

Of Gilbert Eversleigh he thought with burning

hatred, and longed for an opportunity of doing him an injury. In his first rage he had an idea that he would withdraw all his business from Eversleigh, Silwood and Eversleigh, but after he had somewhat cooled he came to the conclusion not to do so. The firm, he argued, was far too big and well-established and wealthy to be hurt much by the loss of a single client like him. Bennet's opinion of the standing of the firm was the same as that held by everybody else. Besides, there was another reason for continuing with the Lincoln's Inn solicitors. He told himself that if he placed his affairs in the hands of other lawyers, Francis Eversleigh would inevitably be displeased, and this would lead to a coolness between them which would make it impossible for him to visit at Ivydene. But while Kitty remained beneath the roof of Francis Eversleigh, Bennet had no desire to cut himself off from seeing her there. And he meant to go on seeing her. For, so long as she was unmarried he did not altogether despair. He said to himself that he would wait and see if chance did not throw something in his way.

As for Kitty, she thought it best to say not a word to Gilbert of Harry Bennet's proposal, but she took an opportunity of cautioning her lover to beware of him.

To say that Kitty was amazed and dismayed at the presumptuousness, the boorishness, the bad manners Bennet had exhibited, would give but a faint indication of what she felt. She considered his behaviour, with its unconcealed menace, little short of an outrage. Yet, at the same time, an alarmed instinct in her apprised her that the man was dangerous, and that vigilance was necessary in dealing with him.

Gilbert was rather inclined gently to laugh down

the warning Kitty gave him ; in his abounding happiness he smiled at her fears, but she insisted none the less that Bennet was a man to be watched.

"You must always be on your guard with him," she said.

"What can he do, my darling?" asked Gilbert.

"Nothing," he said, with reassuring caresses.

CHAPTER VIII.

It was now approaching the end of the week, and still there was no sign of Morris Thornton, to the intense disappointment of his daughter Kitty, who was all impatience to see him.

As each day in that week of terror to Francis Eversleigh went past, he sank further and further into a slough of despond, and became a prey to deep melancholy. The routine of his office work, with its appeal to long-established habit, and the pressure to keep up appearances so far as it was possible, helped him a little during the day; but in the evenings, when his family were around him, and in the long, broken nights, when his wife lay asleep by his side, he abandoned himself to the deepest dejection.

Going to his office each morning, he speculated drearily, with aching heart, whether this day or the next would see Morris Thornton walk in, bringing ruin with him. "How am I to meet him?" Eversleigh asked himself over and over again, but saw no answer.

Silwood had not spoken to him again except on such items of business as had to be discussed by them together. These consultations would have had something farcical in them for him if the situation had not been so wholly tragical. He marvelled at the matter-of-fact way Silwood went about these and other affairs.

Very quietly and methodically Silwood went on maturing his plans, nor did he refer to them any more when talking to Eversleigh; but he had paid another visit in disguise to Douglas Street, Stepney, and had warned his wife to be ready to move when he gave the word. He had also intimated, but more plainly, to Williamson, that he would take a holiday very soon—his reason, he alleged for taking it, being the great heat which still continued. Never had there been known so hot a July. Williamson admitted in his thoughts that the reason was an excellent one, but wondered why Mr. Eversleigh, who continued to look very ill, did not talk of taking a vacation instead of his partner, who seemed to be very much in his usual health.

On the Saturday of that week, Cooper Silwood, whose punctuality had hitherto been invariable, did not appear at the office when half-past ten came round, and Williamson waited for him in vain for some time. A little after eleven, however, the head-clerk received a note from him, saying that he had gone to the Continent, and intended making for the north of Italy, where he had been some years before. He went on to say he was not certain how long he would be away, but it would be for two or three weeks, perhaps a month.

Carefully as Silwood had prepared the way, Williamson could not but be surprised at the suddenness with which, in the end, his principal had departed, and naturally his suspicions of there being something wrong were increased; but they remained indefinite and vague, for he could fasten on nothing tangible.

In the course of the morning, Francis Eversleigh, for the purpose of asking Silwood a question, went into the latter's room, and found it empty. It was evident,

too, from the state in which it was, that Silwood had not been there that day. He at once leapt to the conclusion that Silwood had gone away—in plain terms, had absconded—an eventuality for which he was not altogether unprepared, as it had been part of the scheme Silwood had mooted to him after the confession of the defalcations, and also on the occasion of their interview at Ivydene.

Still, this might not be the explanation, and Eversleigh, after a few seconds' thought, put on his hat and walked up to Silwood's private chambers in Stone Buildings. Here he found the door locked, and a sheet of paper pinned to it, on which was written, "Out of Town."

His conjecture thus confirmed, it was none the less a terrible shock to Francis Eversleigh; even though he had anticipated it, it was nevertheless hard to bear.

"He has left me to stand it all alone," he thought, but even as he said this to himself, his common sense reasserted itself. "But what will his flight benefit him? Ultimately he will be hunted down; he cannot escape the law; no one can."

Then, hardly knowing what he was doing, he tried the door again, pulling at the handle with all his might, but it was to no purpose. He stood gazing gloomily at the closed door.

"I have a great mind to have it broken open," he muttered. "I can easily frame some excuse for doing so—say he has forgotten something. But if I did have the door opened, what would be the use? What good would it do? It would not bring him back; it would not bring the money back. No, best leave it alone."

Moving with slow, halting steps down the stairs, he kept asking himself the question, "What am I to do now?" His agony of mind was almost beyond human endurance as this question incessantly hammered on his brain, obscuring and dulling his powers. Then, in a muddled sort of way, he began to reason.

First, he might go to the authorities and incriminate himself; but no one, he told himself, was required to do that; it was too much to expect any one to do.

Second, he might destroy himself, and so make an end. Was this not the best course to pursue? With this idea in his mind, he remembered a shop in the Strand, in the window of which he had seen revolvers for sale. Why not buy one and be done with it all? "Why not?" he asked himself, and turned his face towards the Strand. But he had only gone a few paces when the thought of his wife and children was too poignant to allow him to proceed further with his desperate purpose, and so he faced about and returned to New Square, thinking, thinking of what he was to do.

There was only one thing to do, he concluded, and that was to continue doing his work at the office as best he could till the crash came. It could not be long in coming, he reflected with indescribable bitterness, for was not Morris Thornton already overdue?

He had scarcely got seated in his own room when his son Ernest came in, and remarked that Mr. Silwood had gone for a holiday.

"I had not heard that he intended going," he went on; "in fact, I was astonished to hear of his taking a holiday just now. Mr. Williamson tells me he has left for the Continent."

"Yes," said Francis Eversleigh, somewhat vacantly,

"he has gone for a holiday. I suppose I have forgotten to mention to you that he was going abroad for a while," he continued, pulling himself together. "He has not had a holiday for some years."

"I see. By-the-way," said Ernest, "who in his absence is to look after his department?"

"I'll do so myself," observed the other, quietly.

"But, father," objected Ernest, "you are not well enough——"

"Oh, yes, I am," protested Eversleigh. "I'll attend to it myself, my boy."

"Why not let me do it?"

"I had rather not," answered his father, sharply; "I prefer to do it myself."

Eversleigh knew very well that it would never do to let any one but himself look after Silwood's department.

The day of Silwood's disappearance wore to its end; the next day, Sunday, passed. It saw the lovers at Ivydene much engrossed with themselves, but not to such an extent as to prevent many comments on the delay in Morris Thornton's coming, and some surmises as to its cause, the chief of which was that he was carrying out his idea of giving Kitty a "surprise"—carrying it a little further than she had expected. Though she was disappointed, she was not alarmed.

On the Monday of that week, Francis Eversleigh, looking more haggard and wretched than before, was again at 176, New Square.

"Will Thornton come to-day?" he asked himself, despairingly.

He strove to keep calm and hide his sufferings from the world, but every moment was torture. Yet Monday went the way of all former Mondays, and still Morris

Thornton did not come. And so it was with Tuesday, and Wednesday, and Thursday, and Friday, and Saturday; the week was gone, and Thornton had not appeared!

Pondering this fact, Eversleigh, who remembered what Thornton had said about his ill-health, was inclined to the conclusion that somewhere on the road his old friend had had an attack, and had broken down. But, if this were the case, why had he not sent, or caused to be sent, a message to the firm or to his daughter? Eversleigh knew she had not heard anything further from her father, nor had the firm heard from Thornton.

In one sense, the non-appearance of Thornton was a relief to Francis Eversleigh—it put the day of judgment off; but in another, the prolonging of the suspense intensified his mental agony.

Thornton's silence was as terrible as it was really inexplicable.

Kitty, who was not aware of her father's serious condition, and hence could not frame from that circumstance a possible explanation of his not coming, was greatly perplexed.

At first she felt no fear, and kept saying to herself and to Gilbert—to whom, of course, she talked of all that was in her heart—that she would see her father to-morrow or next day; but to-morrow became to-day, and next day to-morrow, and yet he did not appear. And there was nothing from him—not a single line!

Gilbert, lover-like, did his utmost to cheer her, saying what was obviously probable—her father had been unexpectedly delayed, but would be here very soon, and so on—and he spoke with such cheeriness

that she gained some confidence from his. But as the days sped by, and Morris Thornton came not nor sent word, her apprehensions increased, and all Gilbert's loving speeches could not allay them. Gilbert, too, began to wonder not a little what it all meant.

It at length became evident to him that there was something peculiarly significant in the non-appearance and silence of Morris Thornton. He spoke what was in his mind to his father, who, in reply, told him the only hypothesis he could form was that Thornton had fallen ill at some point in the course of the journey, though that did not account for nothing being heard of him. Gilbert now learned for the first time of the precarious state of Thornton's health. He agreed with his father that nothing should be said about it to Kitty, as it could not but add to her anxiety.

But what Gilbert had heard made him comply all the more eagerly with a suggestion Kitty offered on the next Sunday, when they were talking on this subject, which temporarily had assumed more importance almost than their love.

This was that a cablegram should be sent to Vancouver to Morris Thornton, asking when she was to expect to see him in London.

Gilbert despatched the cablegram for her from the Central Telegraph Office in the Strand, on his return to town late that evening.

No answer was received by the girl till far on in the afternoon of Monday.

The first thing she noticed on looking at the reply message was that it was not signed by her father, but by his local agent.

Then she read the whole cablegram, which ran—

"Your father sailed from New York for Southampton by *St. Louis*, July 21. No further advices. Wallace."

"July 21," said Kitty to herself. "Why, he ought to have been here a week ago at least."

For it was now Monday, August 9th!

Eighteen days had elapsed since the sailing of the *St. Louis* from New York, on July 21st!

CHAPTER IX

WHAT was the explanation? Kitty wondered, much perplexed.

Her father had left Vancouver and had gone to New York—so she gathered from the cablegram. And as he had not been to see her she concluded that he could not be in England, and that meant in the circumstances that he had not sailed from New York on the 21st of July as he had intended. Gilbert had suggested to her that her father had been unexpectedly detained, and at first, as this seemed a probable solution of the problem, she was inclined to think this was what had occurred.

But, as she reflected further, it did not seem so likely. For supposing he had been forced to delay his journey for a whole week, and had exchanged his berth on the *St. Louis* for one on the boat of the same line sailing a week later, that is, on the 28th, there would still have been plenty of time for him to have arrived in England and to have seen her, as he would have reached Southampton by the 3rd of August, or by the 4th at latest. And it was now the 9th!

As Kitty tried to puzzle the matter out, her fears, vague, but none the less distressing, were greatly increased, and she began to suspect that something, she knew not what, had happened to her father.

Gilbert, now as anxious as Kitty was, was at Surbiton

in the evening to hear what news she had received from Vancouver, and he was as much bewildered as she by the cablegram from Wallace, Morris Thornton's agent. All he could do was to remind her, as he had done before, that the delay in her father's coming, as well as his silence, might all be part of his scheme to "surprise" her. But Kitty replied that this made her father out as unkind in the extreme; she was sure he would never willingly put such a strain upon her affection.

"I can't make it out at all," she said, wrinkling her pretty brows. "It seems very singular that he does not write."

Then an idea struck her. It was that there might be, on a careful re-reading of the letter she had received from her father, in which he had said he was returning to England, some words which would afford a clue.

"I shall look at his letter again," she said to Gilbert, and went up to her room to fetch it.

"He writes," remarked the girl, when she had brought it down, "quite positively 'I will come in a few days after you receive this.' 'A few days,' he says. If he had sailed on the 21st of July and came here to-morrow—why, it would be nearly three weeks, and you can't call that a few days."

"No," assented Gilbert; "but, Kitty, it's hardly three weeks. If he had sailed on the 21st he would have been here about the 28th or the 29th. You see what's left is more like ten days than three weeks. But what is the date of your father's letter?"

"July 11th."

"And when did you get it, dear?"

"Oh, Gilbert, don't you know, don't you remember?" asked Kitty, with some reproach in her voice. "Surely,

you cannot have forgotten that I got it on the very day you told me that you loved me!"

"Ah, sweetheart," quickly replied Gilbert, taking her hand and pressing it tenderly, "I've been so happy that I have lost all count of time—I forget everything but you, my darling!"

"A pretty speech," exclaimed Kitty, smiling upon him while her hand returned the pressure of his, "and I suppose I must forgive you, Gilbert. But about this letter of father's. Well, it came just sixteen days ago to-day. Now, sixteen days are not exactly a few days, are they?" she asked, sticking to her point.

"It was on the 24th that his letter came," said Gilbert.

"So you have remembered the date, sir?" cried Kitty.

"I had not really forgotten, dear; but thinking about your father had, for the moment, put it out of mind."

"Oh, yes, I know, Gilbert," she said, a little absently.

He devoured her with eyes of love, but he noticed that her thoughts were not with him. They had reverted to her father.

"I think I see how it all fits in," she said, after a long pause, "for his sailing on the 21st. He wrote me on the 11th; that gave him ten days to wind up his business in Vancouver, so far as he could wind it up, and to get to New York in—five days in Vancouver, and five days for the journey to New York. If he had sailed on the 21st, as he said to his agent he would, he would have been here on the 28th or 29th, that is, in three or four days after his letter. Now three, four, or even let us say five days, would be a few days—just as

he says in his letter. I can see he had planned it all out, so as to fit everything in. Don't you see that, Gilbert?"

"It certainly looks like it, dear."

"Yes, it does. It is very strange that he did not carry out his intention. I cannot understand it. There is some mystery about it I cannot fathom."

"It seems singular," observed Gilbert; "but I dare say that, if we knew all the circumstances, there would be a perfectly natural explanation, sweetheart. Pray do not give way, my darling," he besought her, but his own manner was not reassuring.

"I cannot help being anxious," replied Kitty. Then she looked again at the cablegram from Wallace, and said, "The agent wires, 'Your father sailed from New York by *St. Louis* on 21st.' That is quite definite, is it not? And he adds, 'No further advices.' Does that mean that father had advised Mr. Wallace that he had sailed? Oh, Gilbert, I am afraid, I am afraid! We imagine that the agent knew only of father's intention —an intention, we suppose, he was prevented from carrying out. But think what it means if we are wrong in imagining this altogether! Suppose that father did sail on the 21st! Gilbert, I am afraid," said Kitty, in a low tone; "I am afraid," she repeated, and the girl's voice suddenly fell into a whisper. She shivered slightly, and the tears stood in her eyes as she clung to her lover.

Gilbert took her in his arms, soothed and caressed her. In the course of their conversation he had tried to put the best construction on Morris Thornton's non-appearance, but at heart he felt, like Kitty, that there was good ground for misgiving. And to have

told the girl what he knew, but she did not know, of the serious condition of her father, would be only to add to her trouble. As for himself, that knowledge made him appreciate the gravity of the matter even more than she did. He resolved, therefore, to set inquiries on foot at once, and furthermore to set to work vigorously himself to probe the thing to the bottom.

Next morning, accordingly, he went to the office of the American Line in London—the line of steamships to which the *St. Louis* belonged—and asked the clerk who waited on him for a list of the passengers who had sailed from New York by that vessel, on July 21st.

The list was handed to him immediately. A cursory glance showed him that the name of Morris Thornton was on it.

Dumfounded, he stared at the list, saying nothing. His surprise was so marked that the clerk could not help noticing it, and was surprised in his turn.

"It does not mean," said Gilbert at length, "at least, always, I suppose, that because an individual's name is on the steamer list he must necessarily have sailed, does it? I mean that he might be detained at the last moment."

"That, of course, is possible," replied the clerk. "The list is printed some little while before the ship sails. But I can tell you if there was any one on the list who in the end did not sail, if that is what you wish to know."

"That is very kind of you," said Gilbert, but he paused, reflecting that a question of this kind was a somewhat delicate one. And he was aware that the clerk was eyeing him curiously, almost suspiciously.

"Perhaps," said the clerk, "it would be simpler and

better if you told me about whom you desire to ask. Is there any name on the list in which you are particularly interested?"

Gilbert noticed that the clerk was studying his face with marked intentness, and he wondered why; he understood later.

"I see on the list," said Gilbert at length, "the name of Mr. Morris Thornton."

"Mr. Morris Thornton!" exclaimed the clerk, whose tone was such as showed there was something out of the common attaching to the name.

"Yes, Mr. Thornton," Gilbert went on. "Can you tell me if he sailed by the *St. Louis* on the 21st?"

"Are you a friend of Mr. Thornton's?" inquired the clerk, in an eager voice.

"In a sense, yes," replied Gilbert. "But you have not answered my question."

"In a sense," said the clerk, repeating Gilbert's first words; then he continued, "I have a most special reason for asking if you are a friend of his. What do you mean, sir, by saying that you are a friend of his in a sense?"

"Well, I am engaged to his daughter. She expected to see her father some days ago, but he has not arrived. She knew he intended sailing from New York on the 21st, though she only knew of it yesterday. She became alarmed on not seeing him or hearing from him, and she cabled to his agent in Vancouver, and in that way learned that her father was to have sailed on the 21st. She asked me to make inquiries. I shall be glad if you can help me. Can you tell me if Mr. Thornton sailed on the *St. Louis* or not?"

"Mr. Thornton," answered the clerk, in a queer, half-frightened voice, "did sail by the *St. Louis!*"

"What! Are you sure of that?"

"Absolutely."

Gilbert had a staggering sense that he was on the edge of some extraordinary affair, and he gazed earnestly at the clerk, who looked at him with corresponding intentness.

"Have you anything more to tell me?" asked Gilbert.

"I think it would be better if you spoke to the manager," said the clerk. "Would you mind coming in to see him?"

"Not at all; but why?"

"Well, you are not the only one who has been making inquiries about Mr. Thornton—I may tell you that; but, please come into the manager's room."

Gilbert saw the manager, and explained his errand.

"I am afraid," said the manager, speaking in an impressive voice, "that something may have happened to Mr. Thornton; indeed, I have very little doubt of it."

"Why?"

"Mr. Thornton did sail from New York as he intended; not only so, he landed at Southampton in due course, and came on to London on the 29th of last month. On that day he took a room at the Law Courts Hotel in Holborn. These are the facts."

"How do you know he went to the Law Courts Hotel, may I ask?"

"I have it from the hotel people themselves, and why they told me of it you will presently understand.

It appears that Mr. Thornton was a good deal of an invalid; at any rate, shortly after he got to his hotel he was taken very seriously ill—he had a violent heart-attack of the most alarming character. He fell down in the hall of the hotel and became unconscious. He was immediately conveyed to his bed and a doctor was summoned."

"Ah," said Gilbert, interrupting him, "I knew that he had a weak heart. But, pardon me, pray continue."

"Mr. Thornton was successfully treated by the doctor, and after some hours recovered, but he remained in bed for the rest of that day and most of the next."

"He got better," said Gilbert, beginning to breathe more freely. "That is good news."

"Oh, but wait," said the manager. "I have not finished yet. He stopped in bed at his hotel most of the next day, as I have already told you—that was the 30th, you will remember. He improved so much that he told the attendant who had been detailed to look after his comfort, that he felt quite equal to getting up, and though the attendant remonstrated with him he persisted and did get up. You follow me, Mr. Eversleigh?"

"Perfectly," replied Gilbert, who saw that something very unusual was coming, and was most eager to hear the end of the story.

"Mr. Thornton had dinner at the *table d'hôte*—he was as well as that, you understand. After dinner he sat for quite a time chatting with two or three of the other guests, and, rather late in the evening, he announced his intention of going out for a short stroll;

he said the fresh air would do him good. And he did go out."

The manager paused, and looked at Gilbert significantly.

"He went out," he resumed, "but he has never returned."

CHAPTER X

"WHAT?" cried Gilbert; he felt as if some one had struck him a sudden blow.

"He has never returned to the hotel," said the manager, very seriously.

"Ah! to the hotel, but where——" Gilbert stopped without completing the question, while excitement struggled with anxiety within his breast. He gazed imploringly at the other.

"He did not return to the Law Courts Hotel that evening," the manager went on, "and nothing has been seen or heard of him since."

Gilbert smothered an ejaculation. What a thing, he thought, to have to tell Kitty!

"That was the state of the case up to yesterday," continued the manager. "I have had no communication on the subject this morning, but if you like, I will ring up the hotel on the 'phone—there may be fresh news."

"Thanks; but one moment, please. You had what you have just told me from the hotel people?"

"Yes, and also from the police who are now moving in the matter, though I am not aware of their having found out anything."

"The police!" exclaimed Gilbert, almost protestingly, but even as he spoke he knew it was a fit and

proper case for the police to take up. "Please go on," he said.

"Of course," resumed the manager, "the police had to be called in. Between ourselves I think they should have been called in sooner than they were, but at the same time it must be acknowledged that the hotel authorities were in a difficult position; people in their business are always anxious not to interfere with the freedom of their guests, so they make allowance for eccentricities and what might be considered rather erratic movements."

"I understand," said Gilbert. "Perhaps you will now tell me just what action the hotel people took—you can ring them up later."

"Very well. Mr. Thornton went out from the hotel late that Friday night—the 30th of July was a Friday—and on his way out he spoke to the porter, saying he would go along Holborn and take a turn, it might be, up and down Chancery Lane, if it was pretty quiet."

"The porter remembered that distinctly, I presume?"

"Yes, perfectly. He did not see Mr. Thornton return, but he thought nothing of this, imagining that Mr. Thornton had gone back into the hotel when he, the porter, happened to be away for a minute from the door."

"I must see that porter," Gilbert broke in. Was he, he wondered, the last man to see Thornton alive? For, already, a conviction was springing up within him that Thornton was no more, and that this was the mournful intelligence he would have to carry to Kitty.

"Certainly you must," assented the manager.

"Well, next day a chambermaid, on going into Mr. Thornton's room, found that his bed had not been slept in; she reported it, but nothing beyond taking a note of the circumstance was done at the moment by the hotel people. They supposed, naturally enough, that Mr. Thornton would turn up in the course of the day."

"But surely," said Gilbert, "they should have felt some alarm seeing that they knew how frightfully ill he had been two days before, don't you think?"

"You must bear in mind, in fairness to them, that they do not care to appear to limit in any way the liberty of their guests—and also, Mr. Eversleigh, that they never suspected anything was wrong; it is easy to be wise after the event."

"Yes, yes," Gilbert agreed, but he spoke with some impatience.

"At first," the manager went on, "they were under no apprehension as to his safety, but when he did not return that day at all, nor the next, they began to think it a little strange; they thought it very singular, too, that they did not hear from him. They waited, however, till the Tuesday, and then they communicated with the police, and the affair is now in the latter's hands. A detective-inspector came to see if I could throw any light on the mystery. Of course, I was greatly interested, as you may imagine, but I could tell him nothing. I went round to the hotel in Holborn, and there learned what I have told you. I am afraid there is nothing more known at present."

"But have the police discovered no trace of him?"

"I don't think they have. I believe they are completely baffled—at their wits' end. They have no clue,

none at all, so far as I can hear. No; the fact is that Mr. Thornton has vanished, you might say, from off the face of the earth. It is as if he had never been!"

"What a terrible thing!" said Gilbert, in a voice of gloom. "Is there really nothing more?"

"I fear there is absolutely nothing more."

"Have you made any guess as to what has happened?" asked Gilbert.

"No. You will see the police, Mr. Eversleigh?"

"At once. But perhaps you will ring up the Law Courts Hotel; there's just a chance they may have something fresh."

The manager immediately telephoned, and was told there were no further developments to be reported; Mr. Thornton was still missing, and nothing had been heard of him.

Gilbert thanked the manager for the information he had given, and with a heavy heart went off to Scotland Yard. He thought of the loving girl who had looked forward with such keen pleasure to the coming of her father, and who was now so anxious about him. How was he to tell her what he had heard? And he feared that the worst had happened to Morris Thornton; he felt his conviction growing that the man was dead. Still, he must not say so to Kitty, so long as there was any uncertainty.

Gilbert was seen at the "Yard" by Detective-inspector Gale, an officer of great experience, and a man of considerable ability. In introducing himself Gilbert mentioned that he was the son of Francis Eversleigh, of the firm of Eversleigh, Silwood, and Eversleigh, thinking that they must be known to Gale, who bowed respectfully as he listened. Coming to the

matter of the disappearance of Morris Thornton, he also said that the firm were the solicitors of the missing man. Then he explained how it was he himself came into the case.

"Mr. Thornton has a daughter here?" said Gale, making notes. "I did not know that. Indeed, I know very little about Mr. Thornton. I shall be glad if you will tell me all you know of him."

And Gilbert did so.

The detective-inspector asked several questions about the letter Thornton had addressed to his daughter, and dwelt upon the sentence in it which spoke of Thornton's intention to "surprise" Kitty.

"I should like to see that letter," he said.

"Certainly. You think it important?"

"It may be—one can never tell," said the officer, diplomatically, "but the word 'surprise'—the idea—seems to suggest a certain whimsicalness on the part of Mr. Thornton."

"It was merely his humour, I imagine," remarked Gilbert; "but I can't for an instant suppose that Mr. Thornton carried his whimsicalness, as you term it, or his humour to such a prodigious degree as to disappear from his hotel in the way he did."

Gale nodded. Then he shut his note-book.

"You would think so, Mr. Eversleigh," he observed, referring to Gilbert's last sentences; "but you would be surprised how often men disappear intentionally."

"One hears of such things, but not frequently."

"These disappearances are much more common than the public have any notion of, I can assure you. I am speaking now of what I have called intentional disappearances, and I don't mean what you might term

criminal disappearances either. Men make up their minds to cut away completely from their surroundings, to begin a new life, to turn over a fresh leaf, and so on; do you see?"

"Yes; but there could be nothing of the kind in the case of Mr. Thornton."

"I do not say there was," said Gale, but his voice was non-committal.

"May I ask if you have formed any theory regarding Mr. Thornton's disappearance?"

"I have not; the facts are too few."

"Have you any hope?"

"Do you mean hope of finding where he is gone or what has become of him?"

"Yes. And do you think he is alive? I have a haunting dread that he is dead."

"Dead? Perhaps so; I cannot say, but I think it is too soon to come to that conclusion. Hundreds, yes thousands of people, disappear in London every year, and many of them are never heard of again. But you cannot say that of the majority. I would not be surprised to discover that Mr. Thornton is alive, and I would be as little surprised to find out that he is dead."

"It has occurred to me," said Gilbert, who felt that the officer took up a safe but scarcely a sympathetic position, "that it is possible Mr. Thornton had another sudden heart-attack, and was taken into a house near at hand by some kind person——"

"But suppose he had an attack and had been taken in as you suggest," interrupted Gale; "surely it is impossible to suppose that such a circumstance would not be reported somewhere? Mr. Thornton would have

sent word to the hotel sooner or later, don't you think?"

"Yes; that is reasonable."

"I had thought of that idea myself, but, on consideration I dismissed it as quite untenable. Mr. Thornton, I have come to the conclusion, has either disappeared intentionally, or he is dead. Now I can see nothing to indicate an intentional disappearance: the state of his health would seem absolutely to forbid it."

"Then you think he is dead?" asked Gilbert, as Gale paused.

"I can't say, please remember, but it looks rather like it."

"But what about the body?"

"Oh, bodies can be made to disappear."

"Do you mean that you think he has been murdered?"

"I won't go so far," said Gale, cautiously, "but Mr. Thornton was a rich man, and probably had valuables about him; he was in a weak, feeble state, and so would fall an easy victim. And it was late in the evening when he went out. I am afraid it is possible—I will not say probable, for there is no evidence—that he was murdered the night he left the hotel."

"Is it not dreadful? I've been thinking much the same. But how did you know he was rich?"

"We took possession of what property he had at the hotel. It was not much, but what there was hinted pretty plainly at wealth. There was one extraordinary thing—we could not find his address, I mean the address of the place he lived in."

"That was odd, and I cannot explain it," said Gilbert. "You know now he lived in Vancouver?"

"Yes, you have told me so, but I did not know it before. We made inquiries by cable in New York—the label on his luggage showed he had come from that city—but he was unknown to the police there, nor could they find out anything about him. Now we shall make inquiries in Vancouver."

"I hope you will let me know if you hear of anything," said Gilbert, rising to leave, after thanking the inspector for his courtesy. "Miss Thornton is very anxious about her father, and she will be more anxious than ever after she has heard what I have to tell her."

"Certainly."

Gilbert was just about leaving, when it struck him as very desirable that the officer should communicate with his father, Francis Eversleigh. He had already told Mr. Gale that his father's firm were Morris Thornton's solicitors, and now he suggested to the inspector-detective to accompany him, if he had the time, to see his father, and tell him exactly how the case stood.

Gale thought for a moment, and then said that if he would wait for a short while until he had finished a memorandum he had been engaged on when Gilbert had been shown in, he would go with him to his father.

"I really ought to see him in the circumstances," said Gale. "He may be able to give us some clue."

But when Gale and Gilbert put the facts before Francis Eversleigh, he had no suggestion to make. Indeed, the solicitor was perfectly thunderstruck by the intelligence they brought him, and acted in such an extraordinary way as to cause Gilbert to fear that the news had affected his brain. Eversleigh, in fact, could hardly believe it; but when he did, it, too, seemed part and parcel of that hideous waking nightmare in

which he now lived. Yet, somewhere in the darkening depths of his mind, there shot up a tiny ray of hope. For if Morris Thornton were dead, or if it were only that he had disappeared, was not that to postpone the day of reckoning?

Gilbert's most difficult and painful task was to disclose to the girl he loved all he had come to know that day. With infinite gentleness and delicacy he told her the truth, and wound up by declaring she must not lose hope of seeing her father again; it was far too soon, he urged, and the circumstances were far too obscure to admit of any definite conclusion being arrived at.

But Kitty, crying and sobbing bitterly in her lover's arms, would say nothing. Gilbert knew, however, from her passion of weeping, that she already mourned her father as dead. Very tenderly he sought to console her, but at first her grief would have its way, albeit she clung to him as if she would never let him go.

CHAPTER XI

Whether to keep a matter to themselves, or to take the public into their confidence, is a question to which the police never seem able to give a decided answer. There are occasions, of course, in which secrecy is plainly indicated, but with respect to the majority of cases they are too much inclined to the same course of procedure.

Touching the disappearance of Morris Thornton they had hitherto deliberately kept any statement about it from the newspapers, and the facts were known only to a few. And Detective-inspector Gale was of opinion that it was better to go on with his inquiries as quietly as possible. But Gilbert Eversleigh could not agree with him.

"I am for giving his disappearance the widest publicity," said Gilbert, in conversation with the officer, on the day subsequent to that on which he first saw him. "It is probable that we will hear something in this way. You must confess that up to the present you have accomplished nothing, Mr. Gale. Is it not so?"

"Yes, that is quite true; but I have not given up the hope of doing something soon."

"That's all very well, but you must pardon me if I

tell you I am not satisfied. I have consulted Miss Thornton, and she is with me in thinking that the occurrence should be made public."

"That is Miss Thornton's wish?"

"Yes; and she also desires my father's firm to offer a large reward to any one who can furnish the information we want. Still, they will hardly like to act in that way if you have any substantial objection to offer."

Gale reflected for a few moments.

"You are sure that Miss Thornton will not mind?" he asked, the question showing the direction of his thoughts. "It will not be exactly pleasant for her to see her father's name in the papers."

"She is suffering intensely as it is," replied Gilbert, "but the affair is too serious for her to give way to personal feelings of that sort; indeed, if the papers give great prominence to it, she will be pleased rather than the reverse, for she thinks, and so do I, that something may come of it."

"What reward does she think of offering?"

"A thousand pounds."

"A large sum! It might tempt some one."

"Tempt some one?" repeated Gilbert. "What do you mean?"

"Well," returned the officer, speaking slowly and thoughtfully, "let us consider the case. You know that I think Mr. Thornton either disappeared intentionally——"

"I thought you had rather given that idea up," interposed Gilbert.

"Still, it's a possibility, though there is a good argument on the surface—on the surface, mind, I say—

against it in the state of his health. A man in his precarious condition was not likely to embark on such an adventure as an intentional disappearance implies. Still, as I said, it is a possibility. Now, if his disappearance was intentional, he must be living somewhere, and must be in contact with other human beings. That is so, is it not?"

"Yes."

"While offering the large reward you mentioned, you would at the same time give a full description of him. That description might be seen by one or more of those with whom he associates. In this manner information might be obtained. There is another point, too, and it is that if after a time no such information was forthcoming, then the other hypothesis will be vastly strengthened."

"By the other hypothesis you intend the idea that he was murdered, I suppose?" asked Gilbert.

"Yes. As I have already told you, I fear that will turn out to be the true reading of the mystery. The more I think of it, the more certain I feel about it. There is, however, a third hypothesis, but it seems so highly improbable that it is hardly worth mentioning. It is that Mr. Thornton committed suicide."

"Suicide! Impossible!"

"It is very highly improbable," said Gale, "but, pardon me, not impossible. I wonder how many things are really impossible?" he continued, on what was a favourite theme of his. "If you knew but a tithe of the things ordinarily called impossible that I have found not to be impossible at all! But I digress. Well, with regard to his having committed suicide, it was no great distance from his hotel to the river."

"Oh, Mr. Gale, this is absurd. Why should he commit suicide?"

"The only reason that can give the slightest colour to such a supposition is that he suffered terribly from his heart—the pain in these attacks is usually frightful—and he might have felt that rather than stand another he would prefer to die; or again, it might be that he was slightly out of his mind because of the pain. But I don't really put this hypothesis forward as one that is probable. No. I am afraid he was murdered. Still, even in that case, the large sum you offer might tempt some one—some one who perhaps saw the deed done, or had his suspicions about something he saw—to come forward with useful information."

"It might even tempt an accomplice—that is, if there were an accomplice, might it not?" asked Gilbert eagerly.

"It might, though it's not at all likely."

"But you withdraw your opposition to making public the disappearance of Mr. Thornton?"

"Yes, though I do not advise it. I hope it will not annoy Miss Thornton very much, but I fear she may be troubled with newspaper reporters."

"Cannot you refer them to me or to my father?"

"I shall do so, but if they can ferret her out they will, you may be sure."

"Oh, I dare say I shall be able to baffle them," declared Gilbert. "Now, will you assist me in drawing up a statement for publication?"

Before Gilbert left Scotland Yard a brief but succinct account of the disappearance of Morris Thornton was put into writing. Then followed a description of Thornton, taken from the detective-inspector's

note-book, who, in his turn, had got the particulars from certain members of the staff of the Law Courts Hotel. Further, Mr. Gale drafted what he thought should go into the advertisement, offering the reward of a thousand pounds, and this Gilbert took to his father. On his way to Lincoln's Inn he stopped at a typewriting establishment, and gave instructions to have copies made of the account of the disappearance, and to send one to each of the London papers.

"This will be enough," thought he, "to set the ball rolling."

Next he saw Francis Eversleigh, who, he found to his surprise, was against inserting the advertisement. The older man, who had his own bitter, gnawing, consuming anxieties of which the younger guessed nothing, had a glimmering notion that to advertise the reward was somehow likely to precipitate a crisis in his affairs and bring about exposure. But, backboneless as usual, he was easily over-ruled by his son. The advertisement was made out, typewritten, manifolded, and also sent to all the London journals.

The day following, Gilbert had ample proof that he had set the ball rolling with a vengeance. Pressmen, it seemed to him, descended upon him from every quarter of the town, eager, clamorous, importunate, determined not to be sent empty away. But, after all, Gilbert had not much to tell them. They managed, notwithstanding, to write sensational and, for the most part, highly over-coloured articles round the missing man. One or two of the evening papers wrote leaders on the subject, and in many ways the public interest in Thornton's disappearance was excited to the highest pitch. For one thing, his wealth was exaggerated to

such an extent that he was represented as a sort of colonial Crœsus, and in London, and throughout the country, people talked of and speculated about the man now everywhere described as "The Missing Millionaire." Indeed, the reward of a thousand pounds was hardly needed to stimulate public curiosity and sympathy and activity.

High and low, rich and poor, the man of Mayfair and the man of Whitechapel, conversed about it with the same relish, the same wonder. The man in the street, shopmen, clerks, labourers, even beggars and outcasts, all heard of the mysterious disappearance of Thornton, and were all anxious to know the explanation of so extraordinary a thing. In brief, it was the one topic of the moment.

And the offer of the large reward was not without a certain effect.

It had become a matter of general knowledge that Morris Thornton, on leaving the Law Courts Hotel, told the porter there that he was going for a stroll along Holborn and probably up and down Chancery Lane. From this it fell out that many people of the amateur detective variety investigated this quarter, especially at night, but without being much or any the wiser. Yet, indirectly, one of them did better than he knew, for from him a certain human wreck, to whom a doorway in Chancery Lane was a frequent refuge, learned of the disappearance of Morris Thornton. Inquiring with great earnestness what was the date of Thornton's disappearance, he was informed that it was Friday, July 30th. It was now Friday, August 13th.

"That is exactly a fortnight ago," said the wreck, with an unmistakable note of exultation in his voice.

"The very night—the very night," he muttered, but so indistinctly that the other could not catch the words.

"What is it you say?" he asked, but the wreck declined to satisfy his curiosity.

"Oh, nothing—nothing at all," he replied.

"Did you happen to be here in this street that night?" inquired the other, suspiciously.

"Yes, I was."

"And did you see any thing or any one?"

"I saw nothing—I saw nobody," said the wreck, promptly.

But next morning he had a different story to tell.

He had very good reasons for not going to Scotland Yard, so he betook himself to the office of Eversleigh, Silwood, and Eversleigh, whose name appeared at the foot of the advertisement offering the thousand pounds reward. He told his tale to Francis Eversleigh, with whom at that time was Gilbert. The latter had been hurriedly sent for by his father on a matter of the most urgent importance. They were anxiously discussing it, when Williamson had come in and announced that there was a man below who had called in answer to the advertisement respecting Thornton's disappearance.

"He says he has information, but he would not disclose it to me," remarked Williamson, in an injured tone.

The head-clerk felt hurt that morning. He knew that Francis Eversleigh had received a letter from Italy, and he suspected it had something to do with Mr. Cooper Silwood. He had even ventured to put an indirect question about it to Francis Eversleigh, but with no success. Instead, that gentleman had told him

to go and fetch Gilbert at once from the Temple, or if he was not there to hunt him up and bring him.

He now saw from Gilbert's face, as well as from Francis Eversleigh's, that something very grave was being discussed. On the table lay two papers, one of which was partly printed, while the other was a long, closely-written letter. Before withdrawing, Williamson tried to see what was on the former, but could not.

"I suppose we must have this man in," said Gilbert to his father.

"Yes, yes," assented Francis. He said it with the air of one to whom nothing could ever much matter again.

"I cannot bear it—I cannot bear it!" he exclaimed suddenly, after Williamson had left the room. "It is too much!"

"Bear up, father—bear up!" cried Gilbert, little understanding all that was in his father's mind.

But the wreck was at the door.

Ragged, tattered, with patched boots and a greasy cap, with pinched features and a general appearance of having gone irremediably to the bad, the wreck yet bore himself well, and when he spoke his language and accent were those of a gentleman. He looked at the two Eversleighs, and addressing the older asked if he were Mr. Eversleigh.

Francis Eversleigh bowed to the wreck, who had once been a gentleman.

"I am Francis Eversleigh," he said; "this is my son Gilbert. You have something to tell us?" he suggested.

"Yes; but first I wish to say that my information

by itself may not be of much use. Still, I think it may put you on the track. If that is the case, I wish you to promise me that I shall have some share of the reward."

"That will be only fair."

"Mr. Thornton," said the wreck, without further preface, "disappeared on the night of Friday, July 30th. He went out for a stroll in Holborn, and was to go into Chancery Lane. I was in Chancery Lane that night, and I saw something that struck me as very curious."

The wreck paused impressively.

"What was it you saw?" asked Gilbert.

"I saw a man," responded the wreck—"some sort of workman he appeared to be from his dress—come out of the iron gate, the small iron gate at the north-east corner of this Inn—Lincoln's Inn."

"But it's always kept locked at night," objected Francis Eversleigh.

"It was unlocked that night, at any rate," observed the wreck. "I heard the sound—it was a low sound, but the night was very still—of the unlocking. I saw the man lock the gate again, and he looked round him like a man afraid of being spied upon. He did not see me, for I was in the shadow of a doorway. He seemed to me to be rather flurried. Presently he walked rapidly away. I thought it very strange that a workman should have the key of the gate and at such an hour. I wondered what it could mean, but I might have forgotten all about it if the same man had not returned. He had not been gone for more than half an hour when back he came, unlocked the gate, and passed on within. I spent the night in the doorway, but

he did not appear again. Very remarkable, was it not?" asked the wreck.

"Very remarkable indeed!" said Gilbert, drily.

"Don't you believe me?" inquired the wreck.

"I do not see the bearing of what you have told us on the disappearance of Mr. Thornton. Of course, what you saw was very strange, and should be communicated to the authorities of the Inn, but I can see no connection between the man who came out of the gate and Mr. Thornton. Do you think there was?"

"I told you at the beginning that what I had to communicate might not be of much use. I thought, however, it might perhaps fit in with something you knew, or that it might give you a hint," said the wreck, in a tone of dejection.

"We shall not forget what you have told us," said Gilbert, as the wreck prepared to leave the room. "You should report what you saw to the authorities of Lincoln's Inn, who will, no doubt, reward you for your trouble."

Gilbert followed him to the door, and put some silver into his hand as he went out. Then Gilbert closed the door, and sat down beside his father.

"It looks," said he, "as if there were some uncommonly queer goings-on in this old Inn."

But his father scarcely noticed what he said. Francis Eversleigh's gaze was fastened on the paper lying before him on his table—the paper which was partly printed, partly written on.

It was an official certificate from the Syndic of Camajore in Italy, duly signed and sealed, of the death of Cooper Silwood.

CHAPTER XII

The certificate of Cooper Silwood's death and the accompanying letter had come that morning in a long, queer-looking envelope, plastered half-over with stamps and pitted with postmarks, amongst them being that which showed the packet had been registered. It was addressed to Francis Eversleigh personally: hence it had not been touched by any one prior to his coming to the office.

When he first saw the packet he thought there was something ominous about it, and a sure prescience that it contained bad news deterred him from opening it immediately; he therefore allowed it to lie on his table for some time. Such a want of courage had now become characteristic of the tortured man. At last, however, he screwed himself up to the point of looking into it. As it happened, he took out and glanced at the letter first; it was in a language he did not know, but he guessed it was Italian. It was written in a minute, cramped hand, difficult, in any case, to decipher, and he put it aside. Then he scanned the certificate. Here the printed words and his Latin helped him, and he had little trouble in understanding what it was.

But in his shattered state it did not come home fully to him at once. When it did, the effect on him was terrible—his head swam distressingly, his heart fluttered painfully, as he fell back gasping in his chair.

Cooper Silwood dead!

It seemed impossible to him, as his brain, caught in strange tangles, like water-weeds in an eddy, whirled this way and that.

Dead!

The thing at last impressed itself upon his consciousness so as to blot out everything else for the time.

"What next? What next?" he cried aloud, in a voice that was hardly recognizable as his; it was the protest of a man goaded beyond the limit of endurance.

Then his brain clouded.

"Cooper Silwood dead—dead—dead—dead!" he babbled to himself, looking at the spots in the wall opposite him, and noting mechanically the shapes and sizes of them. "Dead—dead—dead!" he mumbled, till the words lost all meaning.

Something sub-conscious whispered to him this was madness, and with a mighty effort he sought to recover himself. The effort saved him.

The first force of the shock at length passed; its recoil passed off too, and he came to something like his senses. Desiring instinctively to lean on some one stronger than himself, his impulse was to send for his son Gilbert immediately, and accordingly, when he had pulled himself still further round, he summoned Williamson, and dispatched him to find and bring the young man to Lincoln's Inn. He had hardly done so, when his vacillating mind swung round again, and he regretted it. But by the time Gilbert arrived his mood had changed once more.

When Gilbert appeared in his father's room he found Francis Eversleigh in tears. They were the tears of

weakness, of indecision, of self-pity; but when Gilbert heard what his father had to tell him he thought, of course, they were the tears of one who mourns. They could not but seem natural in the circumstances. He had always disliked Silwood; but his father and Silwood had been associated in business for many years, and though he was rather surprised that his father should be in tears over Silwood's death, he was not at a loss altogether to account for it: his father, he thought, had a good heart, and was overcome with sorrow. He supposed that a long acquaintance with Silwood had shown his father some excellent qualities in the man now dead—qualities which he himself could not see.

"His death will be a great loss to you, father," said Gilbert; "you must—and will—feel it very much, I fear."

"Yes," said Francis Eversleigh, in a harsh, strained voice, staring straight before him.

"Have you told Ernest about it, or Mr. Williamson?" asked Gilbert.

"Not yet; but, of course, they must be told. First of all, however, I should prefer to learn something of the circumstances attending Mr. Silwood's death. I must have this letter translated," said Francis Eversleigh, pointing to the communication in the small, cramped handwriting; "I think it will tell us exactly what has happened."

"I can get you a man," said Gilbert, "from a College of Languages near here, if you like. Shall I go and bring him? Or shall I take the letter with me and get it translated?"

"Bring him here," said Eversleigh, who wished to

keep everything connected in any way with Silwood as much in the office as possible.

"The other way would be the quicker, perhaps," Gilbert suggested.

"Perhaps; but I had rather he came here," rejoined Eversleigh, with some firmness.

In about half an hour Gilbert was back again in his father's room with an interpreter, who quickly made himself master of the contents of the letter, and afterwards read it out aloud to the two Eversleighs.

It was from Ugo Ucelli, Syndic of Camajore, which place, the interpreter explained, was in the north of Tuscany, a few miles from the coast, and no great distance from Leghorn, but the nearest town of importance was Lucca.

The Syndic stated that he had been given instructions by Mr. Silwood to communicate with Mr. Francis Eversleigh should the illness from which he, Mr. Silwood, was suffering at the time have a fatal termination, as appeared to be likely. And the illness had, unfortunately, resulted in the death of Mr. Silwood, as had been feared.

Mr. Silwood had said he was a partner of Mr. Eversleigh's. He, the Syndic, now hastened to write in accordance with the command of the deceased gentleman; he regretted that he had to give Mr. Eversleigh the pain of hearing the sad news, but he had a sacred duty to the dead to perform, and he must discharge it.

Mr. Eversleigh had probably seen from the newspapers, said the Syndic, that cholera was that summer —one of the hottest on record—epidemic all along the Gulf of Genoa and southward as far as Leghorn. Mr. Silwood had fallen a victim to this plague—alas! its

victims were numbered by hundreds and thousands; it was the greatest calamity that had visited Italy for many years!

In Mr. Silwood's case there had been little hope from the commencement of his sickness, to which he succumbed after about twenty-four hours. Everything had been done for him that could be done; he had been attended by a doctor of skill and experience, nor had the tendance of competent nurses been wanting. Ah! It was evidently the will of God! The usual certificate of death was enclosed.

Owing to the requirements of the law, concluded the Syndic, the body was buried early on the morning of the day following that on which the death took place. The deceased had left some effects about which he had not given directions. These were now in his, the Syndic's possession, and he asked what was to be done with them. As Mr. Eversleigh would doubtless know what was proper in the circumstances, he, the Syndic, would be glad to hear from him at his earliest convenience.

Such was the letter of Ugo Ucelli, Syndic of Camajore.

The interpreter was asked to write out a translation both of the letter and of the death certificate; this he did, received his fee, and withdrew.

Death is perhaps the only thing which commands universal respect: all render involuntary homage to the King of Terror. It was this that caused Gilbert, who had no love for Silwood, yet to say with sincerity when the interpreter had gone, "Poor fellow! Poor fellow!" and then he was silent.

Francis Eversleigh had listened in a sort of heavy

stupor to the reading of the Syndic's letter. The feeling which emerged most prominently from out of the chaos of his thoughts was one of envy; he envied Silwood, inasmuch as he was finally beyond the reach of the law—he had gone where its long arm could not go —he was safe! Eversleigh then tried to think what was his position now Silwood was dead, and Morris Thornton was dead, most probably, also; but the man's brain was tired and sick and torpid from the frightful blows it had already been called upon to sustain. With a deep sigh, he confessed his impotence to himself, and abandoned the attempt.

"We must tell the others at once," he said, feeling it was easier to do something than to think, "and have an announcement of the death drawn up. We must take the usual steps."

"Yes, yes," said Gilbert, "we must do so."

But Gilbert also had been thinking during the few minutes in which he had been silent.

"What a strange place," he observed, "for Mr. Silwood to have been at! Perhaps, though, he was just passing through. Still, at this time of the year, it was an odd place to choose for a holiday. He must have known, too, about the cholera, surely. I never heard of Camajore! Did you?"

"I believe Mr. Silwood spent a holiday a few years ago in the north of Italy, probably at this very place, or somewhere in its neighbourhood, but I do not remember exactly," rejoined the other, dully.

Francis Eversleigh sat in his chair, inert, without initiative; he seemed to be incapable of action. It was Gilbert who took the lead.

"I suppose it is pretty certain that Mr. Silwood has

left a will," remarked Gilbert. "Of course letters of administration will have to be taken out, and his estate looked after generally. You will do that, I presume?"

"Oh, about his will. I don't believe," returned Eversleigh, "that his will is in the office—indeed, I am not aware there is a will at all." He had very good reasons for imagining there would be no will, for had not Silwood told him that he had no money?

"Mr. Silwood must have left a will, father," said Gilbert, confidently; "a man of his business habits would be certain to make a will. If it's not in the office here, then I should think it will be in his chambers in Stone Buildings."

"Perhaps so."

"Well, that's what I should say. In any case, father, you will have to go across to his chambers, see what there is in them, and have everything taken care of. I wonder who is his heir, or if he has one? He never seemed to have any relations or friends—but then I did not know him very well."

"Relations, so far as I know, he had none," replied Francis Eversleigh; "and I scarcely think he had many friends. He always lived a very lonely life."

"He was so engrossed in his business!"

"Yes, yes—quite so. As regards his chambers, I know he left them locked up."

"Still, don't you think you ought to examine them, considering present circumstances? If you like, I will go over there with you now."

Eversleigh shrank from the thing. However, he looked at his strong handsome son, and thought that if he must go to Stone Buildings—and he knew that

he had better go as soon as possible—it was with Gilbert that he would choose to go.

"I think, first," he said, "it will be as well to tell Ernest and Mr. Williamson what has occurred; afterwards you and I will proceed to Mr. Silwood's chambers and examine them."

Ernest Eversleigh and Williamson, therefore, were sent for. Eversleigh announced to them that Silwood was dead, and asked Gilbert to read to them the translation of the Syndic's letter. Both were profoundly surprised; Ernest, who appeared genuinely concerned, expressed his regret at the news, while Williamson, who was astonished beyond measure, looked utterly aghast, and as if he thought the end of the world was about to come.

"We—Gilbert and I—are going over to Mr. Silwood's rooms in Stone Buildings," said Francis Eversleigh. "I must consider what is necessary to do in the circumstances, but I can say nothing at present."

"Perhaps Mr. Williamson can tell us," said Gilbert, as his father stopped, "if there is a will?"

"No, Mr. Gilbert, I do not know of one," replied the head-clerk. "Mr. Silwood never mentioned the subject to me."

"I think that is all," said Francis Eversleigh, after a moment's pause, and Ernest and Williamson withdrew.

"Well, Gilbert, I suppose we had better go at once and get it over," observed Eversleigh to his elder son. "We will call one of the porters, and get him to go with us to open the door."

On their way they met a porter of the Inn, and

told him of Silwood's death, and that they wished to gain admittance to the chambers in Stone Buildings.

"Sorry to hear about Mr. Silwood," said the man; "must ha' been very sudden, surely. Dear me, dear me! But about opening the door o' his rooms, I'm none so certain that I can do it. Mr. Silwood had a lock and key of his own—a special Yale, which he'd had fitted on himself. However, I'll try."

But the lock of the door, on which still was pinned the piece of paper with "Out of Town" written upon it, resisted all his efforts. He tried on it every key in his bunch, but without effect.

"This is a job for a locksmith, that's what it is," said he at last. "Shall I go and fetch one? I can bring a man here in a few seconds who has the proper tools, and he'll soon do the business."

"Yes, please get a locksmith at once," said Francis Eversleigh.

In about five minutes the porter returned with a locksmith, who set to work and forced the lock, but not without a considerable expenditure of time and labour.

As the door was opened, a fœtid, noisome odour rushed out and filled the landing. The locksmith involuntarily stepped back.

"Whiff, whiff, what's that?" cried he, while the others exclaimed about the horrible smell.

It was the locksmith who entered the room first, a few feet in advance of the others. Instantly he uttered a loud shout of terrified surprise. The others now pressed in after him, Francis Eversleigh the last.

There lay the body of a man, face downwards, on the floor.

Eversleigh, with a countenance as white as chalk,

looked from the body to his son, and back to the body again. Gilbert was as white as his father. The other men looked mutely at the figure lying on the floor; it seemed to fascinate them. No one spoke a word. A great question shaped itself in the stillness of that room, but none of them was eager, for the moment, to find the answer.

Who was the man—the man who lay dead?

Other questions came into their minds, but this was first.

"We must see the man's face," said Gilbert, and his voice broke the spell which seemed to hold them powerless.

The porter and the locksmith turned the body over.

Though the features had partially become decomposed, the face was still recognisable on close inspection.

"It's a stranger, I think, leastways in the Inn," said the porter.

Eversleigh gazed at the dead face, peering into it. Suddenly he trembled as with ague, while he vainly struggled to speak.

Gilbert, too, had been closely scrutinizing the dead face, and he thought that he recognized it. Looking at his father and seeing his evident emotion, he felt certain.

"It is Morris Thornton!" said he, in a hoarse unnatural voice.

"Morris Thornton!" echoed Francis Eversleigh, and fell in a heap across the body of his old friend.

CHAPTER XIII

"MORRIS THORNTON!"

Both the porter and the locksmith had heard the name distinctly before Eversleigh swooned away, and both understood who the dead man was. They were so astounded that they stood looking at each other with startled faces and mouths agape, while Gilbert bent over the unconscious form of his father.

"Morris Thornton at last!" cried the porter; "it's the gentleman as was missing."

"Morris Thornton—yes," said the locksmith; "the missing millionaire—the man wot was advertised for in all the papers."

And then both men were silent, thinking of the reward of a thousand pounds offered for information about this very man.

"I was the first as found him," remarked the locksmith, coming to his wits, to the porter.

"We all found him together, didn't we?" asked the porter, in an aggrieved tone.

Gilbert, meanwhile, had moved his father from off the dead body of Morris Thornton on to the floor, and sought to bring him to by unfastening his collar and tie and opening his shirt. The son felt that his first concern was with his father, not with Morris Thornton—with the living rather than the dead. And now, as he

tried to bring back to the inanimate frame the spark of life, he noticed, as he had not done before, how changed, how shrunken were the face and figure of his father. He knew his father had been ailing for some time, but he had not realised how far the mischief had gone. And on the top of this illness had come, first the death of Silwood, and now the discovery of Morris Thornton lying dead in Silwood's chambers! Small wonder was it, he thought, that the shock of this last circumstance, combined with all that had preceded it, had proved too much for his father.

For some minutes he continued his efforts to re-animate Francis Eversleigh, but without avail. The porter and the locksmith gave him what assistance they could; finally the former suggested that a doctor should be sent for.

"Yes," agreed Gilbert; "go round to King's College Hospital. I know one or two of the doctors there; take my card, and get one of them if you can. Say the case is urgent."

But the porter, who by this time was swelling with the importance of the affair—an importance in which he saw himself included—had another suggestion to make.

"After I get a doctor," he said to Gilbert, whom he knew to be Francis Eversleigh's son, "don't you think it would be well if I fetched a policeman? There's the dead body," he added significantly, "and of course there will have to be an inquest."

"Quite right," replied Gilbert; "but get the doctor first."

And the porter withdrew, more important than ever.

"Shall I stay, sir?" asked the locksmith.

"Yes, please, until the police come; they will want your evidence."

"Very well, sir."

While he was trying to resuscitate his father, Gilbert's mind had been in a whirl; now that he had desisted from the attempt his thoughts shaped themselves more clearly. Here, before him, lay Kitty's father dead—Kitty's father, that was his first thought—and his heart bled for her. He knew that, though she had said and felt that Morris Thornton was no more, she would still suffer terribly on hearing positively that he was dead.

Then the strangeness of the thing—the body being found in Silwood's room, and Silwood his own father's partner!—took hold of him. Silwood dead! Morris Thornton dead! What did this conjunction indicate? That there was something extraordinary about it did not admit of any doubt whatever when it was coupled with the fact that Thornton's body had been found in Silwood's chambers. How had Morris Thornton come to be there at all? And in what way had he met his death? What connection was there between that death and Cooper Silwood? What had Silwood to do with it? Had he anything to do with it? For what reason? With what end in view? Had Thornton been murdered? If so, it could not have been by Silwood, for what motive could he have had for killing Thornton?—Silwood, a member of one of the most respectable firms in London. And yet there must be some connection and some explanation. What was it? What could it be?

As these questionings flashed through Gilbert's

mind, he stood gazing upon the dead man's face, as if from its sightless eyes and from its dumb lips there might come some solution of the mystery.

And then his thoughts took a fresh turn. Still gazing at the face of Morris Thornton, he wondered if the man had come to his death by being shot, if upon the body would be found the marks of the lethal weapon that had slain him, if the murderer had left behind him some sign which in the end would lead to his detection and conviction. But this was to presume Thornton had been murdered, and there was no certainty as to that.

While he was thus musing, his father showed some indications of reviving. His eyelids fluttered and his lips worked slightly. Gilbert bent down and raised his father's head. With a deep sigh, Francis Eversleigh opened his eyes and stared at his son as at some stranger. But reviving still more, a light of recognition came into his face, and he moved his head.

"Are you better, father?" asked Gilbert.

Eversleigh made an effort to speak, but it failed; then he looked piteously at his son.

"I wish I had some brandy to give you," said Gilbert. "A doctor will be here in a few minutes."

At the mention of the word "doctor," Francis Eversleigh struggled to raise himself, and, with Gilbert's help, managed to get into a sitting position. Glancing about him in a weak and uncertain way, his eyes fell upon the body of Thornton; a frightful spasm seemed to shake him to pieces; then his eyes all at once blazed with light and life, but in an instant they became clouded and overcast.

"Morris Thornton—I remember," he said, speaking

with great slowness, as though speech were exceedingly difficult to him.

He shut his eyes, as if he would shut out the sight of the dead man, while Gilbert watched him anxiously and supported him with his strong young arms.

Presently he opened his eyes again, looked at the body, and then at Gilbert. On his face was a great solemn interrogation which his son could scarcely fail to understand. Eversleigh was asking what did it all portend, but Gilbert did not speak; he himself could see no way out of the darkness surrounding the scene.

"What has happened?" asked the older man, but even as he spoke Gilbert felt his father's form was beginning to press more heavily on him.

"I do not know," the son replied.

Francis Eversleigh now fixed his gaze on Thornton's body once more.

"Murder!" he suddenly cried in a piercing voice, and dropped back unconscious again.

"Murder!"

Gilbert told himself that he could follow the mind of his father perfectly. His father thought Morris Thornton had been murdered. It was to all intents what was in his own mind.

But if Thornton had been murdered, who, then, was the murderer?

The piercing cry of "Murder!" which Francis Eversleigh had raised before swooning again had not been heard by Gilbert only. The locksmith, who was still in the room, heard it for one, and it filled him with fresh excitement. He had been endeavouring to

puzzle out the thing in his own way, and was not exactly surprised to find the idea of murder imported into it. That cry of "Murder!" was the echo of his own thoughts, and from that moment he was so convinced that Thornton had been murdered that nothing would disabuse him of the notion.

The cry was heard by three others, who were only a few steps away from the door of Silwood's chambers when Francis Eversleigh gave utterance to it. They were the doctor from King's College Hospital, a policeman from Lincoln's Inn Fields, and the Inn porter, all arriving together. On hearing it, they ran forward into the room.

The porter had already told both the doctor and the policeman his own version of the finding of the body of Thornton and of the fainting fit of Mr. Eversleigh.

"What was that cry I heard?" demanded the policeman, who was the first to speak.

As he spoke he threw searching glances about and around the room. But Gilbert paid no heed to his question. He knew the doctor, thanked him for coming so promptly, and asked him to try to revive his father.

"It is the second time he has fainted," said Gilbert.

It was the locksmith that answered the policeman's query.

"The sick gentleman," said he, "him that's in the swound, called out loud 'Murder!'—he'd been looking at the body—and then he dropped off again. That was the second time he swounded."

"Oh, it was he," said the policeman. Then he advanced to Gilbert, having been prompted thereto by

the porter, who whispered to him, "He's young Mr. Eversleigh," and said, "Will you tell me from the beginning the whole story, sir?"

By this time his father was in the capable hands of the doctor, so that Gilbert was able to give his whole attention to the policeman. As succinctly as possible, he narrated the circumstances which had led to his father and himself going to Silwood's chambers, how the door was broken open, and the body of Thornton found lying on the floor. Next the policeman listened to what the porter and the locksmith had seen, and by the time he had heard what they had to tell him, Francis Eversleigh had come to himself, though he looked shattered and frightfully ill. Him, too, the policeman questioned.

"Mr. Thornton was a client of yours, I believe?" remarked the policeman, after many other queries.

"Yes, an old schoolfellow, and one of my greatest friends," replied Eversleigh. "His daughter is engaged to marry my son Gilbert, here."

"This gentleman?" asked the policeman, pointing to Gilbert.

"Yes."

"And these are the private apartments of your partner, Mr. Cooper Silwood?"

"Yes."

"And the dead body of Mr. Thornton, your friend, is found in the private apartments of your partner, Mr. Silwood?"

"Yes."

"And Mr. Silwood is dead?"

"Yes."

"Most extraordinary thing I ever heard of!" exclaimed the policeman. "There's something very strange here."

"My father, as you can see for yourself," interposed Gilbert, "is ill; he is in no fit state to stay here a moment longer than is necessary. But if I can help you, I shall be glad to do so."

"Mr. Eversleigh ought to go home at once," said the doctor.

"That is all right," said the policeman.

"Do you report to Inspector Gale?" asked Gilbert of the policeman; "I know him very well."

"Yes; I shall report to him. And in the mean time these chambers must be closed up and sealed. The inspector will no doubt come and examine everything in them. This is the usual procedure. And of course there will be a coroner's inquest. Nothing more can be done at present, I think. Please sir, do not touch the body," he added, speaking to the doctor, who was scrutinizing it carefully.

"If I went to Scotland Yard, should I find the inspector in?" asked Gilbert.

"You'll find him there at 2.30."

"And there is nothing more that can be done just now?"

"Nothing."

Leaving Silwood's chambers in the charge of the policeman, who had now been reinforced by the arrival of two other constables, the two Eversleighs, the doctor, the locksmith, and the porter filed out of the chamber of mystery and death. As they entered the court of Stone Buildings, they saw that little knots of people had collected, who were discussing something

that evidently was unusually interesting. The fact was that the porter, on his way for the doctor and the policeman, had let fall hints of what had been found. The Eversleighs were asked by some gentlemen of the long robe, whom they knew, what was the truth of the matter, and they put before them the bare facts. But the porter and the locksmith were not so reticent. The former gossiped freely, but not without a fitting sense of the greatness of the occasion. The latter went into Chancery Lane by the iron-gated footway leading from the court of Stone Buildings and saw a crowd gathered on the pavement opposite the windows of Cooper Silwood's chambers. Already it had been spread abroad that these chambers had been the scene of some astounding tragedy. The locksmith, on being asked by some one in the crowd if he could throw any light on the subject, forthwith poured forth all he knew, declaring that undoubtedly Morris Thornton, whose dead body had been discovered in Silwood's room, had been foully murdered. And when the rumour ran that it was the body of the Missing Millionaire, of whom everybody had heard, the excitement rose to fever heat in the crowd.

A passing reporter, on the staff of one of the evening papers, saw the crowd, and was soon in possession of the pith of the news, but desirous of getting the fullest particulars, he sought out the locksmith, who told him the whole story, again reiterating his conviction that there had been a murder of the blackest kind.

Thus it was the locksmith's idea of what had happened that coloured the tone of the papers that evening, all of whom made the most of "The Mystery of

LINCOLN'S INN" and "THE MURDER OF THE MISSING MILLIONAIRE," as they entitled it on their bills in the largest of capitals.

And the affair quickly created an extraordinary sensation.

CHAPTER XIV

It was nearly two o'clock that Saturday afternoon when Francis Eversleigh, supported by Gilbert and the doctor, left Silwood's chambers in Stone Buildings. He stopped on his way to his office, as has been said, to gratify the curiosity of some of his acquaintances; but he was so weak and unsteady that the doctor soon forbade him, and rightly, to exert himself even to talk.

On the arrival of the little party at 176, New Square, they were met by Ernest Eversleigh and Williamson the head-clerk, who were anxiously awaiting them, as a rumour had already reached them of the discovery of the body in Silwood's rooms; the report, however, had been so vague that they could not believe it. Williamson, in particular, was sceptical.

Ernest eagerly pressed his father and brother for information; the doctor, however, would not allow Francis Eversleigh to speak, and Gilbert said that he would presently tell them all, but that he must first attend to his father, who was far from well.

"Just one word, Mr. Gilbert," said Williamson. "Is it true that the body of Mr. Morris Thornton was found in Mr. Silwood's sitting-room?—that is the rumour."

"Yes, it is quite true."

Williamson, on hearing this, fell back, with a look

of the profoundest astonishment on his face. Up to this time he had not believed it, because, if it were true, then the suspicions which he had for some time entertained appeared to be more than confirmed, but he had not looked for so startling a confirmation.

"I was right," he told himself. "I wish I could get to the bottom of it."

Francis Eversleigh meanwhile went up to his room on the second floor, and now the doctor insisted that he must remain quiet. Further, the doctor said that he himself would go out to obtain some suitable nourishment for him. As he withdrew from the room, he beckoned to Gilbert.

"Do not leave your father," he said to Gilbert, in the passage. "I am afraid he is ill—of what I cannot say, but it is easy to see that his vitality is very low. Has he suffered from some severe illness—some bad attack recently?"

"No. He has been ailing slightly for a few weeks past—that is all."

"He seems to me to be very much run down," the doctor went on. "You must make a point of getting him to see his own physician—the family doctor. In the mean time, I'll fetch him a strong pick-me-up and some light, nourishing food of which he stands much in need. After he has had it, he should be taken home at once, and put to bed as soon as possible."

"Very well," agreed Gilbert; and the doctor went on his way down the stairs. Gilbert returned to his father's room.

Father and son, now left alone for the first time since the discovery of Morris Thornton's body, looked at each other strangely. Gilbert's gaze seemed to ask

the question, "What is the meaning of all this?" His father understood him but darkly, for he was suffering from a frightful obsession which numbed his brain. He was powerless to think coherently; all that he could fix his mind upon was merely what was nearest him, or what was immediately happening. It was this which explained his next words.

"What was the doctor saying to you, Gilbert?" he asked.

"Well, he said you were run down, and wanted bracing up," replied Gilbert.

"Was that it?"

"Yes; and I must say that it is not surprising you're ill, after two such shocks as you have received to-day."

Then there was silence between them. Strange thoughts, half-formed suspicions crowded upon Gilbert in that pause. He glanced at his father, uncertain whether to speak to him or not.

"Father," he said at last, "I do not like to press the subject on you when you are so far from strong; but how do you account for Morris Thornton's body being found in Mr. Silwood's chambers—have you formed any theory?"

"I know no more about it than you," cried Francis Eversleigh, wildly; "and I do not know what to think. . . . I cannot think about it at all . . . my brain refuses to act. . . . I have no idea . . . it is all a terrible and horrible mystery to me!"

And then he flung up his hands, as if he were throwing off some weight which oppressed him.

"Oh, it is dreadful, dreadful, dreadful!" he cried; then burst into a passion of sobs, the sound and sight of which moved and distressed Gilbert exceedingly.

"Father! Father!" said the son, soothingly, in accents of deepest sympathy.

In a few moments Eversleigh grew calmer, and became a little more like his usual self.

"There is just one thing I'd like to ask you, father," said Gilbert; "that is, if it is not too painful for you."

"What is it, my son?"

"You uttered one word in that room over there," returned Gilbert, nodding in the direction of Stone Buildings.

"What?"

"The one word was 'Murder!' Do you think Mr. Thornton was murdered?"

Francis Eversleigh stared about him with dilated eyes, as might some being who was persecuted and hunted.

"I don't know what to think," he said at length.

"But you did exclaim 'Murder!' That was the idea in your mind, was it not?"

"Ah, Gilbert, my mind was utterly confused. . . . I had suffered a tremendous blow. . . . Surely I can't be held responsible for what I said in my condition at the time."

"True, father. Still, there was the idea of murder in your mind," persisted Gilbert.

"I tell you that I know nothing—nothing."

"Of course, you know nothing, father; but your thought on seeing the body—your suspicion—was that there had been murder. Was it not so?"

"I can't say anything about it," replied Eversleigh, fretfully. "I know as much and as little as you do how it was that Thornton came to be in Silwood's chambers. Pray do not tease me—do not worry me—I cannot

stand it; it is cruel of you to torture me in this fashion."

Gilbert stared at his father, wondering what was meant by the expression "torture"—he could not understand it. He was glad that the doctor returned at this moment, bringing with him wine and a light lunch for the invalid. Leaving his father to the doctor's care, he went down to the next floor, where he saw his brother Ernest, who was all agog to hear the story. When Ernest had listened to Gilbert's narrative, his sole commentary upon it was—

"Of course, everybody will say that Morris Thornton was murdered by Silwood; what other conclusion can there be?"

"But why?" urged Gilbert. "What motive could Silwood have? No, I don't think that can be the explanation. I confess, however, the thing baffles me completely."

"Still," said Ernest, "you may be quite sure that it's what the world will say. In any case, it can't fail to do us a lot of mischief."

"Oh, that will depend on circumstances when the mystery is cleared up, as I imagine it soon must be."

Then Gilbert spoke of their father's condition, and suggested that Ernest should take Francis Eversleigh to Surbiton as soon as the doctor gave permission. As for himself, he was going on to Scotland Yard to see Inspector Gale.

"What am I tell Kitty?" asked Ernest.

"I'll write her a note, which you will give her. Of course, I should have liked to have broken the sad news to her myself; but from what I know of her, I am sure

that she would prefer me to lose no opportunity of unravelling the mystery of her father's death. Besides, she has always believed, since she knew of Mr. Thornton's disappearance, that he was dead."

And Gilbert sat down and wrote his love a letter, full of the tenderest feeling, in which he told her of the discovery which had been made that day, and of which his brother Ernest would give her more complete details. Then he went on to say that he would not spare himself in trying to elucidate the whole strange business, nor would he lose any time; therefore, he would see Inspector Gale that very afternoon; he would go to Scotland Yard, in fact, immediately after sealing the letter to her. But he would be at Surbition in the evening.

When Gilbert did reach Scotland Yard, he found Gale expecting him.

"I was waiting for you, Mr. Gilbert," said the inspector.

"Yes?"

"One of the constables told me you asked when I would be in, and he replied at half-past two; it is a quarter-past three now. By the way, how is your father? I hear he was so shocked that he fainted twice."

"He is better now, but still very much shaken. I left him in the doctor's charge, and when he is able to go my brother Ernest will take him home."

"I think his home is in Surbiton?"

"Yes; I told you that when we were discussing the disappearance of Mr. Thornton."

"Quite so. A day or two's rest will pull your father round. Of course, I must see him. Do you think he will be fit to see me to-morrow?"

"I should think so. And he must be as anxious as anybody—indeed, more anxious than anybody—to have this extraordinary affair cleared up."

"Certainly. Now, Mr. Gilbert, let me hear everything from the beginning. Take your own time about it, and try not to forget anything. Don't leave out the slightest touch that may have any bearing on the subject."

"I will do my best," said Gilbert. "My father, on learning of the death of Mr. Silwood, sent for me this morning."

"Excuse me," interrupted the inspector, "but I must ask you questions as you go along. Was it this morning your father heard of Mr. Silwood's death, and how did he hear of it?"

"By letter this morning. The letter was from Ugo Ucelli, the Syndic of Camajore, with the usual certificate of death. The letter gave the particulars of Mr. Silwood's death. Cholera is epidemic along the Gulf of Genoa, and Mr. Silwood fell a victim to it. The body was buried twenty-four hours after death. Of course, the news affected my father very much—it was totally unexpected."

"What was Mr. Silwood doing in Italy?" asked Gale.

"He was on a holiday."

"Had he been long away from the office, from Lincoln's Inn?"

"A week or two only, I think."

"You cannot say exactly?"

"No, but you will easily find out at the office."

"I thought you might know, but, as you say, I can ascertain the date at the office. You see, of

course, that it is necessary to get to know Mr. Silwood's movements?" The last sentence was put interrogatively.

"This means, I imagine, that you connect Mr. Silwood with the death of Mr. Thornton?" asked Gilbert.

"That is the obvious thing," replied the inspector; "but it is so obvious that I distrust it. I always doubt the obvious in these cases. Here, however, it is my duty to neglect nothing. And I must make it my business to find out everything I can about Mr. Silwood, and with regard to that I count with confidence on your father's assistance. Well, to go back, your father, on learning of Mr. Silwood's death, sent for you; what came next?"

"He showed me the certificate signed by the Syndic; it was in Italian, a language neither my father nor I understand, but a large part of the certificate was printed, and from our Latin we made out pretty well what it said. The letter, however, we could make nothing of, so I went and got a man to translate it."

Gilbert broke off suddenly with a sharp ejaculation.

"You have thought of something, Mr. Gilbert?" suggested the inspector, giving him a keen look of inquiry.

"Yes, I have, and a very important thing it may prove too. It has been completely driven out of my mind by the dreadful discovery in Stone Buildings. Now I remember it, and I believe it may give us the key to the mystery."

"What is it?" asked Gale, as Gilbert paused, his face aglow with excitement.

"Before I went out to bring the interpreter something happened," said Gilbert. "Strange that I should have forgotten it so utterly! While my father and I were talking about Mr. Silwood's death, we were interrupted by a man, who had come in answer to the advertisement in the hope of getting the reward of a thousand pounds. The man was as hopeless-looking a waster and vagabond as any I ever saw, but he spoke like a man of education. And he told us that late on the night of the disappearance of Morris Thornton he was in Chancery Lane, and saw a workman coming out of the iron gate at the north-east corner of Lincoln's Inn."

"That is just where Mr. Silwood's chambers are, are they not?" asked Gale.

"Precisely; his rooms are on the top floor of the house at that very corner. Well, this workman behaved in a suspicious manner, and then disappeared. But he returned in about half an hour, and let himself into the Inn again by the iron gate."

"Wait a minute," said Gale. "You said a workman. What was a workman doing in the Inn at that time of night? And with a key which unlocked that gate?"

"These are puzzles, are they not?"

"You have certainly given me something to think over. Have you anything more to tell me about this workman?"

"No; our informant did not see him again."

Gilbert now resumed the thread of his narrative, telling the inspector all that took place when he and his father went to Silwood's chambers.

The inspector, as Gilbert proceeded, compared his statement with the report made by the policeman who had been summoned by the porter.

"What you tell me," said Gale, when Gilbert had finished, "bears out exactly what my subordinate has set forth. The coroner has been sent for, and we must wait till we hear from him. I shall accompany him when he makes his examination of the body, and I expect a message from him every minute."

"Will you let me go with you?" asked Gilbert. "You must remember that I am engaged to Mr. Thornton's daughter, and so am, therefore, in a measure her representative."

"I have not forgotten that, and I do not know that there is any objection. If you will tell me where I can find you, I'll let you know. I must send you away just now, for I wish to be alone to think—and there is a great deal to think of."

"Very well. I'll stay in the waiting-room outside," and Gilbert left the inspector to his thoughts.

CHAPTER XV

"As strange a case as any I ever heard of," said Inspector Gale to himself, after Gilbert had withdrawn. "Now, what do I know about it exactly? Let me see."

Gale was a shrewd man, with an abundance of sound common sense and an extensive experience in criminal matters. He also had a certain degree of imagination, which is the quality the ordinary detective lacks.

From a cabinet he took some sheets of blue paper which were fastened together; they were the memoranda he had made of the facts connected with the disappearance of Morris Thornton. Gale read them over rapidly but carefully. Putting them down on his desk, he reflected.

"Morris Thornton, a rich colonial," he thought, "came to London on July 29th, and put up at the Law Courts Hotel in Holborn. Late in the evening of the next day, July 30th, he left the hotel for a walk in Holborn or perhaps in Chancery Lane—so he said to the porter. To-day, August 14th, his body is found in a room at the top of a house in Stone Buildings, Lincoln's Inn, that is, on the Chancery Lane side of the Inn. That looks as if he had carried out his

intention of taking a stroll in Chancery Lane. This fits in well enough. What next?

"How did he get up to the room at that time of night? The Inn would be closed; the night porter of the Inn must have let him in. I must make a note of that. And what took him there? He must have had some object in view. And the room was in the set of chambers occupied by Mr. Cooper Silwood, one of the most respectable solicitors in London, and a member of the very firm of solicitors with whom Mr. Thornton transacted his business. Could it be that Mr. Thornton had gone to see Mr. Silwood about some matter? But surely not at that hour—it hardly seems possible. Still I must not neglect that phase of the case.

"As regards Mr. Silwood. As he is now dead, the thing looks like leading up to a blind wall. He had been for some time away on a holiday. I must get the date when he left London. If he was in London on July 30th, or on the next day, the case would appear pretty black for him. Then there is the locked door. The door of the room in which the body was found had a special lock, and of course a special key, which Mr. Silwood carried. Some one locked the door on the dead man; the only one, presumably, who had the key to lock it was Mr. Silwood. This also looks pretty black for him.

"But the motive? Suppose Silwood did kill Morris Thornton, what would be his reason? It must have been some very strong reason indeed that would make a respectable solicitor murder an important client. Most improbable—impossible, one would have said; but nothing is impossible, nothing in the world. Yet

everything points to the deed having been done by Silwood. The conclusion is obvious."

At this point in his reflections Gale took a turn up and down the floor. He was saying to himself, as he had said to Gilbert, that when a conclusion was obvious, then it was necessary to beware of it. His long experience had taught him that obvious conclusions rarely turned out to be correct.

"Well, where are we?" Gale mused, sitting down again. "Let us say Silwood had a motive for murdering Thornton, and did actually kill him, and having committed the murder, fled the country on the pretence of taking a holiday—suppose all this; where does it land us?"

Here a curious idea came into Gale's mind. He considered it doubtfully for two or three minutes; then, reminding himself of his favourite theory that nothing was impossible, he gave it tentatively a place in his thoughts.

"Suppose," he said to himself, "that Silwood is *not* dead, and that all this palaver about the certificate of death from the Italian magistrate is a skilfully manufactured affair, a mere pretence, in fact, with the object of defeating justice? If this were so, it would complete the case with a vengeance. Still, why shouldn't Silwood be dead? Well, I must look into it, though the idea that he is alive seems rather far-fetched."

Far-fetched or not, the idea fascinated the inspector as it appealed to his imagination; it haunted him so that he could not drive it out of his mind.

"Suppose," he kept saying to himself over and over again, "Silwood is not dead. If he is not dead, what

does that imply? Does it mean that there is some conspiracy, a conspiracy in which the Eversleighs are involved?"

Gale pondered deeply. He had the feeling that somehow he was on the verge of a great discovery; but, as he thought still further, he was not so sure. It seemed absurd to connect the Eversleighs with anything of the sort. Finally, he came to a decision. Rising from his chair, he pressed an electric bell, and told a man who instantly appeared in answer to his call to ask Mr. Gilbert Eversleigh to step into the room.

Gilbert, expecting that the coroner had been heard from, came in eagerly.

"The coroner?" he asked.

"No, Mr. Gilbert. I wished you to tell me again the name of the place in Italy where Mr. Silwood died."

"Camajore, in the province of Tuscany—it is in the north of Italy, on the west coast or a few miles inland."

"Camajore?" repeated Gale "How is it spelt?"

Gilbert spelt the word.

"Do you know the place?" asked the officer.

"Not at all."

"Do you happen to know the best and quickest way of getting to it?"

"You would take the train for Genoa, I fancy. Camajore is only a short distance from Genoa. But why do you ask me this?"

"It will be necessary, I think, for us to have the death of Mr. Silwood confirmed."

"I understand," said Gilbert, but he had only a glimmering of the inspector's meaning. "It will be as well—as a matter of form."

"Quite so," said Gale. "All sorts of inquiries will

be made, and we must be in a position to answer them. By the way, Mr. Gilbert, would you mind telling me if Mr. Silwood was on terms of intimacy with Mr. Thornton—would you say that Mr. Silwood was as much of a friend of Mr. Thornton as your father was?"

"Mr. Thornton certainly knew Mr. Silwood very well, though perhaps he was hardly on the same terms of intimate friendship as my father was."

"Still there was a considerable acquaintance?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Do you think Mr. Thornton knew Mr. Silwood well enough to go to the latter's rooms at midnight or thereabouts?"

"I should scarcely have thought so. It's rather an extreme thing to go to a man's rooms at that time of night."

"But if there was some pressing reason?"

"Of course, necessity knows no law, but I can't suppose for one instant there was such a necessity. I believe that Mr. Thornton's relations with both Mr. Silwood and my father were of the most cordial character; indeed, I am certain they were. There was absolutely no hint of anything else. I know that for many years past Mr. Thornton reposed the greatest confidence in my father's firm."

"So I understand," assented Gale. "Now, Mr. Gilbert, I must ask you to leave me. I shall tell you the instant I hear from the coroner."

And Gilbert went out once more.

As soon as he had gone, Gale rang his bell again.

"I cannot go myself," he mused; "I must be present at the inquest—that is necessary. I must send Brydges."

Brydges was the detective who ranked next to himself in Scotland Yard. In a moment or two more Brydges was in the presence of the chief.

"You have heard about the Lincoln's Inn case?" asked Gale.

"Yes, something, but not accurately—just what they are saying in the Yard."

"And that is?"

"That the body of the missing millionaire has been found in a room at the top of a house in Stone Buildings, the said room being the sitting-room of a Mr. Cooper Silwood, a solicitor, a member, in fact, of the firm of solicitors who did the dead man's legal business. A very curious position, is it not?" commented Brydges.

"Very curious indeed. All the more so because Mr. Silwood too is dead."

"Yes, I heard that also."

"It is with reference to Silwood's death that I want you just now. I wish you to go to Italy, to a place called Camajore, some miles from Genoa, and find out everything you can about his death."

"Ah!" exclaimed Brydges; "I see. You think his death may be a fake; is that it?"

"Well, it occurred to me that it might be so; at any rate, I think it well worth inquiring further into. You can leave to-night for Genoa?"

"Yes, certainly."

"And you will wire the results of your mission in cipher to me as soon as possible," said Gale.

"Am I to consult the local authorities?"

"Yes; I'll have a letter of credentials prepared for you. You will present it to the police at Genoa, and

I do not imagine you will find any difficulty. Now, go and make your preparations."

Left alone once again, Gale took up the thread of his musings.

"There is one other point," he thought, "and that is the presence in Chancery Lane, on the night when Thornton disappeared, of that mysterious workman, who possessed the key to the iron gates of the small footway communicating with the court of Stone Buildings and Chancery Lane itself.

"What was it I was told? A workman, or a man dressed as a workman, let himself out of the iron gate late at night; the man appeared to be flurried, to act in a suspicious manner. In about half an hour he returned, and let himself in again. He was seen no more that night. And it was *the* night—the night presumably of the murder.

"This assuredly must be followed up; it looks like a clue. I must get hold of the waster who told the story, and hear for myself what he has to say. I wonder if he spoke the truth, or if he invented the whole thing. And if this story is true, and if this workman had something to do with Thornton's death, how is he to be connected with Cooper Silwood? If this workman committed the murder, how did he get possession of the key to Silwood's chambers? Perhaps, during Silwood's absence, he got into the room. Well, it comes back to getting the date on which Silwood left London for his holiday—that's what I must ascertain."

The inspector had reached this conclusion when there was a knock at his door, and a constable entered and informed him that the coroner had sent a message

to the effect that he was waiting for him in Silwood's chambers.

Gale called Gilbert, who had been sitting outside wearily and impatiently, and the two men got into a cab and drove to the scene of the discovery of the body. On their way thither Gale put a question.

"I am very anxious to get to know the day on which Mr. Silwood left London," said the officer; "do you think you could find that out for me this afternoon?"

"I think the office will be closed, but I'll go and see, if you like."

"I wish you would. Suppose you go round to New Square while I go on to Mr. Silwood's chambers?"

Gilbert agreed, and presently was in the office of Eversleigh, Silwood and Eversleigh, where, to his great surprise, he found Williamson still on the premises, apparently hard at work.

"What a day this has been, Mr. Gilbert!" cried Williamson. "I thought I'd wait to see if there was any more news. Your father and Mr. Ernest have just gone home. I'm afraid your father, Mr. Gilbert, is very poorly—not that that is strange, after what has happened."

"No, indeed," said Gilbert. "Can you tell me, Mr. Williamson," he went on, "the day on which Mr. Silwood left for his holiday?"

"A fortnight ago, exactly, to-day I had a note from him, saying he was off to Italy. I don't know whether he went by the night mail on the evening of the Friday or by the continental express on the Saturday morning; he did not mention which train he was going by."

"A fortnight ago to-day? That was July 31st. And Friday was the 30th."

"Precisely," said Williamson, with a touch of malice, "and that is the very day—that Friday—on which Mr. Thornton disappeared. It has a strange look, Mr. Gilbert; I can make nothing of it—nothing at all."

"You are sure of the date?" asked Gilbert, sharply.

"As I said, it was either on the Friday night or on the Saturday morning that Mr. Silwood left."

Gilbert, as he went to tell Inspector Gale what he had learned, could not but confess to himself that the matter did wear a very strange look indeed.

When he got to Stone Buildings, he saw the inspector, the coroner, an assistant, and two constables. It was Gale who spoke.

"The coroner," he remarked, "is having the body taken to the nearest mortuary, Mr. Gilbert, and he will report later. Meanwhile, I have made an examination of these apartments, and I am bound to say that everything in them appears to be in good order. I see no sign of disorder, no indication of a struggle. And I have looked into the bedroom, and there also I can see nothing to take hold of. Mr. Silwood, I should say, prepared in the most leisurely fashion for his trip; not a thing betokens hurry or flurry—this is all satisfactory enough, so far as it goes."

Gale addressed a few words to the coroner, and then the body was removed. As Gilbert turned to leave the room, Gale put his arm on his sleeve.

"What about the date?" he asked.

"Mr. Silwood left either that Friday night or next morning—which, is not certain."

Gale looked at Gilbert, earnestly, but he did not speak; his silence was eloquent enough.

"You think," said Gilbert, slowly, "that Silwood murdered——?"

He did not complete the sentence.

"I say nothing definite, Mr. Gilbert; but don't you think it looks that way?"

"It is impossible—impossible!" said Gilbert.

But Gale shook his head.

When Gilbert got to Waterloo, on his way to see Kitty, he heard at the bookstall people eagerly asking for the latest editions of the evening papers. On the placards he saw in big black letters—

"THE BODY OF THE MISSING MILLIONAIRE DISCOVERED.
"IS IT MURDER?"

How was he to tell Kitty, his darling? What could he say to her?

But when he arrived at Surbiton, he was surprised to find that Kitty showed considerable calmness in the circumstances.

"I was sure my father was dead," she said to him, as they talked over the discovery of the body. "I was certain that if he had been alive he would have come to me. I never had any hope. And, Gilbert, I do not believe that Mr. Silwood killed him. Why should he have done so? I wonder if the darkness which surrounds my father's death will ever be cleared away?"

"It is shrouded in mystery at present, my darling," said Gilbert, immensely relieved that Kitty was bearing up so well; "but perhaps some evidence will be forthcoming at the inquest. It is to take place on Tuesday."

"I think I should like to be present," said Kitty, after a long pause.

"It may be very painful for you, and I do not believe you will be called on."

"It is my duty, I suppose, and I must not shrink from it."

"My own brave little girl," said Gilbert, kissing her fondly.

CHAPTER XVI

All the newspapers had published as full accounts as they could compile of the Lincoln's Inn Mystery, dwelling on and emphasizing the extraordinary features of the case. Determined now to give it the utmost publicity, Inspector Gale had supplied them with most of the information at his command, but he took good care to say not a word about the mission on which he had despatched Brydges. What he did communicate to the Press was sufficient, however, to arouse the public to a still higher pitch of excitement regarding the whole strange story of Morris Thornton. As a natural consequence, the room in which the inquest was held was packed as densely as it could be.

In the mean time Gale had been exceedingly active. He had not yet received any message from Brydges; he did not, in fact, expect to hear from him for a day or two, if so soon. But he had interviewed Miss Kitty Thornton and Francis Eversleigh.

From the former he had obtained her father's letter announcing his coming to England, but he saw the missive was of no particular importance in itself. From the latter person he had been able to learn nothing fresh, but he had a feeling that Francis Eversleigh's state of collapse was much more complete than

the occasion, sad and painful as it was, quite accounted for, and he asked himself if it were possible that the solicitor was holding back something from him.

Both Miss Kitty and Eversleigh had somewhat puzzled the detective, but for entirely different reasons. Both of them were present in the room at the inquest—indeed, they sat side by side; and Gale, secretly watching them, found himself puzzled again by what had puzzled him before.

What puzzled him was, on the one hand, the quiet strength shown by the girl; and on the other, the superlative weakness exhibited by the man. He was astounded by the firm, composed demeanour of Miss Thornton, but he was even more astounded by the nervous, perturbed, and almost hysterical condition of Eversleigh. Gale thought that if the positions of the two had been reversed, he would have understood it better.

The truth was, so far as Kitty was concerned, that having concluded some time before that her father was dead, and also, after hearing the details of the finding of the body in Stone Buildings, that it was in the highest degree improbable that he had been murdered by Cooper Silwood, she had made up her mind, in spite of her grief, to take a certain stand. For she saw that, as the case stood, Francis Eversleigh, her lover Gilbert, and the rest of the Eversleighs, to all of whom she occupied almost the relation of a member of their family, must rest under a heavy cloud until such time as the darkness should be lifted. Therefore, she nerved herself to face this crisis in her and their affairs with all the courage and determination she possessed, and to demonstrate by her attitude that

she, the daughter of Morris Thornton, had every confidence in them. Gilbert, who knew what was in her mind, thanked and blessed her, and admired and loved her more than ever.

Highly intelligent, she did not fail to know that popular opinion pronounced Cooper Silwood, the partner of Francis Eversleigh, the murderer of her father, and she was set on making it plain to all the world that she did not take that view. As she sat by the side of Francis Eversleigh she took his hand, and tried to assure him of her sympathy and support.

As for Francis Eversleigh, his lamentable state was so evident that no one could behold him without pity. His face was full of suffering, his eyes were heavy and dull, his frame was bent and bowed. He tried to concentrate his thoughts, to fix his wandering wits on some definite idea, but the slightest effort exhausted him. All that he was really conscious of was that he was the victim of an incredibly cruel and malicious destiny that was slowly grinding the life out of him. In a blurr of emotions he hazily wondered how he was to get through the ordeal of the day. And further, he had a faint suspicion—he was not able to formulate it clearly—that, when Gale had spoken to him about the date on which Cooper Silwood had left for his Italian holiday, he had said something unguardedly—he could not remember exactly what—to the inspector, which that officer had regarded as peculiar. He was trying, with such strength as was left him, to recall it when the coroner took his seat.

When the jury had been impanelled and sworn, they, according to custom, went to view the remains—now hardly recognizable, but in the dead man's clothes

had been found letters which further identified him, had there been any doubt. But there was no doubt whatever that the remains were the remains of Morris Thornton.

Thereafter evidence was given.

Inspector Gale, between whom and the coroner there chanced to be a tacit feud, on account of former differences—a circumstance which later was to have its effect on the inquest—followed every word with the closest attention.

First came the tale of the finding of the body.

The locksmith was called, and he recounted his share in the discovery in Stone Buildings, as already set forth in this narrative. But he was particularly questioned about the difficulty he had experienced in opening the door of Silwood's chambers. In reply, he described the Yale lock which he had forced to gain admission to the rooms; it was a lock of a special kind, and could only be opened and locked by a special key.

The lock was now produced and identified by the locksmith.

A clerk from the makers was then put in the box. He stated that the lock bore a number in addition to the name of the firm to which he belonged, and by tracing the number in their books, they were able to state that the lock had been supplied to Mr. Cooper Silwood some four years before, and he mentioned the precise date. And with the lock they had supplied two keys; they had not retained a triplicate. One of their men, he said, had fixed the lock on the door of Mr. Silwood's chambers. Asked by the coroner if the lock was of the kind that would shut of itself on the

swinging-to of the door, he answered that it was not; it could neither be opened nor locked without the proper key being used. The door was locked, witness volunteered, after Mr. Thornton was dead.

"I don't know that you can say that!" exclaimed the coroner, sharply. "The door was certainly locked by some one on Mr. Thornton, alive or dead; a key was used, it is plain, but you do not know that Mr. Thornton was dead at the time; you have no right to say that."

"Perhaps not," said the clerk, humbly; "but it occurred to me, sir, that if Mr. Thornton had been alive when he was locked in, he would have tried to get out. When he found he could not get out by the door, would he not have broken one of the windows? Or maybe he would not have had more to do than lift a window and cry for help to some one without."

The coroner agreed that there was something in what the clerk had said, but he did not pursue this branch of inquiry further.

"You said," remarked the coroner, "that your firm supplied Mr. Silwood with two keys?"

"Yes."

"He never told you that he had lost one of the keys?"

"I am positive he never did. If he had lost one, he would have sent to us for another, surely; and then I must have heard of it, for it is my duty to keep the record of the keys. We have a regular registry."

"On the other hand, he might lose a key and say nothing about it; is that not so?"

"Certainly, sir."

Inspector Gale wondered not a little at the unusual line the coroner was taking in his questions.

The clerk was now dismissed, and the Lincoln's Inn porter summoned. The porter corroborated in the main the evidence of the locksmith, the only new point he made being to state that he had been sent for by Mr. Francis Eversleigh to open Silwood's door. He was aware that this particular door had a special lock, and he had informed Mr. Eversleigh of the fact.

Then Francis Eversleigh was called, and as he was plainly very ill, he was given a chair.

The coroner, who knew him perfectly, invited him to make a statement, and in a weak, halting, hesitating manner he did so. When it was finished he was asked a few questions.

"You were aware that Mr. Thornton intended coming to London?"

"He wrote to us to that effect, but he specified no date on which we might look for him."

"You did not know of his arrival in London—until when?"

"Until my son, Gilbert, who had been making inquiries, told me of Mr. Thornton's coming to the Law Courts Hotel, and of the subsequent disappearance. Thereafter my firm offered a reward for any information which might lead us to know what had become of him."

"Your son Gilbert had been making inquiries—why?"

Francis Eversleigh, stumbling at every second or third word, gave an account of the circumstances which

had resulted in the discovery that Morris Thornton had come to London, and had thereafter disappeared.

"I was naturally very anxious," said Eversleigh. "Mr. Thornton was an old and dear friend, and his only child, a daughter, had lived with us for some years."

"Was Mr. Silwood also a friend of the deceased?"

"Almost as much as I was."

"There was no ill feeling between them?"

"I am quite sure there was not."

"Have you any explanation to offer, or any suggestion to make, regarding the finding of Mr. Thornton's body in your partner's private apartments?"

"I can account for it in no way. It is a profound mystery to me. No one was more surprised than I was when the body was discovered in Mr. Silwood's sitting-room. The shock was so great, indeed, that I fainted away."

"What was the date on which Mr. Silwood departed for his holiday—I understand he went to Italy?"

"He went on the very night that Mr. Thornton disappeared, or the following morning. A note was received from him on the Saturday morning saying he was off—that was the day after Mr. Thornton's disappearance."

Here Inspector Gale interposed, and said it would be proved that Mr. Silwood left on the Saturday morning.

The words caused an immense sensation in the room; the feeling was general that this had an important bearing on the case; in the breast of almost every one present there was the impression that the dead man

had been murdered by Silwood. Black despair clutched at Francis Eversleigh's heart-strings.

Gilbert was next called, and said what he had to say in a manly, straightforward manner.

Inspector Gale now came upon the stand, and put before the jury the facts as he knew them. In brief, he said the facts were that Mr. Thornton, on the Friday night in question, left his hotel with the declared intention of going for a walk in Holborn or in Chancery Lane; that he did not return; and that his body, fifteen days later, was found in Stone Buildings, which was a part of Lincoln's Inn, practically in Chancery Lane. Also, that the room in which the body was discovered belonged to Mr. Silwood, who had left London the morning next after the disappearance of Mr. Thornton. The conclusion was obvious; yet, on the other hand, there were two considerations to which importance must be attached: one was the absence of motive on the part of Silwood, the other was that on the very night of the disappearance, a man, dressed as a workman, had been seen to issue from Lincoln's Inn, from the Stone Buildings end of the Inn, and that he had not been able to find out anything about this workman. In these circumstances he suggested that the jury should return an open verdict.

Gale's reference to the mysterious workman was the first intimation the public had received of that person; it had the effect somewhat of casting doubt on the certainty of Silwood's guilt.

"An open verdict," said the coroner, with a curious inflection of voice. "Wait till we have heard the medical evidence."

Dr. Gilson, an eminent man, called and sworn, said

that he had made an autopsy on the body, according to instructions from the coroner.

"With what result?" asked the coroner.

"I found no trace of violence on the body; there was absolutely nothing to indicate Mr. Thornton came by his death by foul means. On the contrary, my examination showed conclusively that death came from the bursting of an aneurism. Mr. Thornton undoubtedly died of heart-disease. In other words, he died from natural causes."

"From natural causes!"

The thing seemed beyond belief.

The coroner, who had been prepared for what was coming, glanced at Gale, and on his face was the ghost of a smile.

Every one in the room looked at every one else with blank amazement.

"From natural causes!" they repeated to each other. Then Morris Thornton had not been murdered after all. But on reflection they saw that the mystery was not solved, and now they inquired, how had he come to die "from natural causes" *in Cooper Silwood's rooms?*

When Francis Eversleigh heard the doctor's words, a light of gladness came upon his face. For the first time for days he seemed to breathe more like a man; but like the rest he was astonished and asked the same question all were asking.

A second doctor, of equal eminence with the other expert, confirmed the statement of his colleague.

"There is not the faintest shadow of doubt," said he, "that Mr. Thornton died from the bursting of an aneurism. He was not murdered, he died from natural causes—so much is absolutely certain."

After this there was very little to be done.

The jury brought in a verdict that Morris Thornton died from natural causes.

But the Lincoln's Inn Mystery was as great as ever.

CHAPTER XVII

Never had there been a more baffling mystery.

Morris Thornton, the missing millionaire, had not been murdered either by Cooper Silwood or the mysterious workman, either of whom might have been thought guilty of the crime; medical testimony, based on the scientific accuracy of an autopsy, was conclusive on this point. The man had fallen a victim to heart-disease, and there was no getting away from the fact. But a great deal about the case called loudly for explanation.

Amongst others were such queries being put as: How did Thornton come to be in Silwood's rooms? Had he gone there of his own volition? If so, with what object? And once there, what had taken place prior to his death? And who had locked the door upon him? And did any one besides Silwood have a key to the rooms?

It was a curiously tangled skein: would it ever be unravelled? or would it take its place among the many unsolved mysteries of London? The Thornton Mystery continued to be the talk, the question, of the day, and many keen brains set to work upon it. The popular imagination, too, was powerfully impressed by the pathos of the idea of Thornton, after years of striving and success in the land of his exile, coming

home only to meet his death in this strange fashion in the midst of such extraordinary surroundings.

As for the inquest itself, its wholly unexpected result filled the general public with astonishment. In some minds it excited a feeling of alarm, because it showed how possible it was for a man to pass out of sight, to be lost and swallowed up, even to die, and all this take place without the police, the guardians of the great city's peace and safety, being aware of it.

Both the amazement and the alarm were evident in that unerring reflex and register of opinion, the Press of the country. Not a newspaper throughout the land but commented at length on the subject. They were at tremendous pains to set forth the whole dark story with the utmost minuteness. Some even attempted a solution of the problems it disclosed. And in one instance, at least, this led to a further development.

The *Morning Call*, a well-known London journal, had secretly changed hands; it had a new editor and for the most part a new staff; every man on it tingled and burned to distinguish himself and cover his paper with glory. The general line taken by the *Call* was the sensational, and the Thornton Mystery was just the sort of thing out of which it calculated to make fresh capital. From its point of view, the tame finding of the jury at the inquest was overwhelmingly disappointing. Westgate, a member of its staff, who had been present at it, told his chief, that the result was "simply disgusting." And his chief, with a smile, had sympathized with him.

Westgate had come from a rival paper known as the *Morning Light*, and was a very smart and capable journalist. From his natural bent, as well as from his

training, he had made himself an expert of no mean standing on all matters connected with crime. He would have been an excellent detective, but the detective service, which is not recruited from the most intelligent classes in the world, gave no sufficient salary for a man of his stamp. As a journalist, he earned twelve hundred a year, and was well worth every penny of it. Inspector Gale, the best detective in England, did not get five pounds a week.

Westgate's chief, who had been editor of the *Morning Light*, knew and appreciated the speciality of his subordinate. Discussing the case after the verdict, he asked him what he thought of it.

"I don't know quite what to think," replied Westgate, "but I am not satisfied. There is something in the affair that does not meet the eye; there is something behind it all. For one thing, I feel as certain as I am of being alive that the solution of the mystery rests with Cooper Silwood. It turns on him as on a pivot. I take no stock in the tramp's story of his seeing a workman coming out of Lincoln's Inn on the night of Thornton's disappearance. If the tramp was in Chancery Lane at the time he said he was, how was it he saw nothing of Morris Thornton? Morris Thornton was undoubtedly in the Lane—at least it is altogether likely—at or about the time the tramp said he was there. But, in any case, who would trust the story of a tramp by itself? Why, you can pick up a waster of the same kind any night of the year you like, and he'll pitch you any yarn he thinks you want. No, the case turns on Silwood."

"Well, suppose I grant you that, what then? If the solution lies with Silwood, it will continue to rest

with him, as he is dead. You run your head up against a stone wall, Westgate. Silwood's death ends the thing pretty finally."

"Silwood dead!" cried Westgate, pursuing his own train of thought. "Just think of it! Isn't it the strangest thing in the world? In the way of coincidence it beats anything I ever heard of. Consider, for a second. Suppose, for the sake of argument, it had been proved that Thornton was murdered, and that the murder was committed by Silwood, what a fortunate event Silwood's dying at this precise juncture would be for Silwood! You see that, don't you?"

"Of course, the coincidence is remarkable, but what more can you say about it? Silwood is dead, and that settles everything—so far as it can be settled. There does not seem to be much more to say."

"Though it does not appear to be much good," persisted Westgate, "still, the key of the situation, as I said before, lies with Silwood. I wish I knew more about that man. Personally, I feel certain that Silwood, when he went off for his holiday that Saturday morning, locked the door on the dead body of Thornton."

"How you harp on this, Westgate! You have no evidence for what you say, either."

"There is a strong presumption, however."

"The exact time of Thornton's death is not known, yet you are arguing as if it was. You cannot say for certain that Thornton was dead that morning at all."

"The doctors agreed that Thornton had been dead about fifteen days when the body was found. That brings his death pretty well, or, at any rate, very close, to the time of his disappearance."

"Still there might be a gap of a good many hours."

"I doubt it," said Westgate, stubbornly. "Let me tell you what happened, as it seems to me. On leaving the Law Courts Hotel, Thornton went to Chancery Lane, got somehow or other into Silwood's rooms, and died there suddenly a short while afterwards. I am convinced that he saw Silwood when he got into the room, and that something occurred between him and Silwood—I don't even attempt to guess what it was—which produced such an effect upon his weak heart that he dropped dead from the shock."

"Your explanation is plausible, but it suffers from your not being certain that Silwood was there with Thornton at the time of the latter's death. In assuming Silwood's presence, you assume too much. But go on with your mapping out of what happened. Suppose we take your suppositions as certainties, what next?"

"When Silwood saw that Thornton was dead, he would ask himself what he was to do," Westgate resumed. "There was the body in the room, and it's being there had to be accounted for somehow. Silwood, I am positive, shrank from saying anything about it—shrank to such an extent that he made up his mind to fly rather than appear to have any connection whatever with it."

The chief of the *Call* shook his head.

"This," said he, "is just where your building up of the case tumbles to pieces. Suppose Thornton died in Silwood's presence, why on earth should not Silwood have said so boldly? Why should he have run away as you conjecture he did? Would it not have been far easier, safer, better for him to have at once summoned a policeman and told him what had happened?"

"But he didn't call a policeman!" exclaimed

Westgate, eagerly; "don't you see where that lands you? Why did he not call a policeman—why? Because he had some strong reason for not doing so. If everything had been absolutely all right, he would, as a matter of course, have summoned a policeman, and there would be no Thornton Mystery at all—only the pathos of the story of a man's career ending in such swift tragedy; that would have been all. No! Again I say that, for some reason or other, Silwood did not care to face the world and tell it what took place in his room that night. Instead of staying to face the music as an honest man would, he resolved on flight, and did accordingly fly the country the following morning. Mind you, I do not say that Silwood knew Thornton died from heart failure—that is another aspect of the thing; he may have believed that he had something to do physically with bringing about the death of Thornton. Still, that is not the main thing. The main thing is that he had some good reason for flight, and that he did fly."

The chief said nothing, though a pause on Westgate's part gave him an opportunity of speaking.

"It is absurd," said the chief at last. "Silwood belongs to one of the best firms in London. His partner, Eversleigh, stands at the head of his profession. You saw him at the inquest."

"Yes; he sat beside Miss Thornton. I thought it rather strange that she should be present at the inquest, but it was evident she was much attached to Mr. Eversleigh in a daughterly way. They say she is engaged to his son."

"Well, Westgate, how does that fit in with your theories about Silwood, Eversleigh's partner?"

"Not very well, I admit, but we are only making guesses and trying to piece things out a bit. And I have not yet told you all that is in my mind."

"Go on," said the editor, as Westgate looked at him for permission.

"I paid very careful attention to the statement made by Inspector Gale. Now, he's not a great detective, but he's shrewd."

The chief nodded assent.

"In his statement, Gale never once spoke as if he thought Silwood was dead."

"What do you say?" cried the other, aroused at last. "Did not speak as if he thought Silwood was dead! By Jove, that's a horse of another colour."

In a flash he saw that, if Silwood was not dead, then the theories of Westgate were likely to become substantialities.

"Gale wanted an open verdict; he actually recommended the jury to bring one in. He spoke of the murder being the work of either Silwood or the mysterious workman — that was before the medical men knocked the idea of murder into thin air—Gale was not prepared for that, I'll swear — but he never once spoke of Silwood as if he thought of Silwood as dead. I noticed that most particularly. Now, to go on with our supposings," said Westgate, with even greater eagerness than he already exhibited, "let us see where we are. Silwood is announced to have died of cholera at some outlandish place in the north of Italy. Perhaps he did, and perhaps he didn't. Say he did not, and that the whole thing is a plant, a put-up job?"

Westgate paused abruptly, and looked at his chief.

"Of course, I see your point," responded the editor. "You would say, following out your theories, that after locking the dead body of Thornton into his room, Silwood went to Italy, and has somehow or other had a false announcement of his death sent to England, hoping in this way to cover up his tracks effectually. But, once more, Westgate, my boy, where is the motive for all this astonishing business?"

"That, I confess, I do not know. But if Silwood is alive, why then, he is to be found——"

He broke off and gazed suggestively at the other.

"And you are the man to find him! Eh, is that it?" asked the editor, as quick as lightning.

"If you say the word!"

Perceval, chief of the *Call*, leaned back in his chair, lost in debate within himself for a minute. As a rule, it did not take nearly so long as that for him to make up his mind.

"All right," he said. "You can go. First, of course, you will go to this place in Italy and ascertain if Silwood died, was buried, and all the rest of it. That may be the end of your search; but if it is not, why then go ahead, Westgate. You'll start without delay, and let me know as soon as possible what you are doing."

And Westgate went from the presence of his chief, rejoicing exceedingly on being sent on a mission after his own heart.

It was therefore more than annoying that almost the first person he saw on his arrival in Genoa was Sub-inspector Brydges, Gale's under-study at Scotland Yard. As soon as he saw him he guessed that Gale had despatched his subordinate to Italy, to make

inquiries about Silwood's death, and a brief conversation with the officer, whom he often met and knew perfectly, made this a certainty.

Brydges made no secret of his errand. He had already wired Gale that he was satisfied Silwood was dead, and had been buried at Camajore, just as the inspector had been informed by the Eversleighs. And he saw no reason for concealing this from Westgate, after they had had some talk together in which both of them, metaphorically speaking, put their cards, or most of them, on the table.

"You can take it from me," concluded Brydges, "that Mr. Silwood is as dead—as dead as Queen Anne."

But Westgate was not satisfied.

So he went to Camajore, saw the Syndic, the doctor, the nurses, and every one besides from whom he could get any information. The result was always the same. Silwood had died. The polite Syndic even took him to see the mound of earth under which lay Silwood s remains.

"It was no good?" asked the chief of Westgate on his return to the office of the *Call*.

"No good at all," said Westgate, much crestfallen.

CHAPTER XVIII

Upon the Eversleighs the verdict at the inquest had various effects.

Mrs. Eversleigh had been completely upset by the discovery of the body of Morris Thornton in the private rooms of Silwood, her husband's partner, but she recovered quickly after the verdict, which dispelled a great multitude of nameless fears that had sprung up within her mind.

The presence of Kitty at the inquest had been entirely her own idea, and it had required courage of an almost desperate sort to carry it out. Her lover, seeing the strain the girl was putting on herself, tried to dissuade her from going, but she bravely persisted. When the verdict was given, and she witnessed the relief it afforded her friends, she felt far more than repaid. At the same time, the tragedy which closed her father's life lay heavy upon her. What helped her most to bear it was Gilbert's love and unfailing sympathy. And on the girl herself all these strange and painful events resulted in materially deepening and strengthening her character. Hitherto anything of the kind had been far removed from her.

With regard to Gilbert Eversleigh, he knew not what to conclude, as all attempts on his part to reason out the mystery of Stone Buildings invariably ended in

confusion. He told himself that the secret of the affair was never likely to be revealed, and was not sure if he were glad or sorry this should be the case. Yet at times he had an uneasy feeling that perhaps, after all, there was more to come.

On the benumbed mind, on the half-paralyzed faculties, of Francis Eversleigh the verdict for a while acted like a charm; for a short time its effect on him was little short of magical.

He had believed that Cooper Silwood had murdered Morris Thornton; what he alone knew made the deed only too probable. To find, then, that there had been no murder was a relief to him beyond all words to describe. For a few days it nearly made a man of him. He saw that much was dark regarding the death of his old friend and client, and he was absolutely certain that in some way or other Silwood was mixed up in it; but to know that his partner had not actually been guilty of the blackest crime in the calendar had a beneficial influence on him.

The sanguine side of his nature, long overshadowed, now began to assert itself; he even whispered to himself that it was possible his ruin might be averted after all.

At first he feared that the standing of the firm might be so gravely compromised by the events which had taken place that its position would be rendered hopeless by the withdrawal of their business by its clients; but, when then they took no steps in this direction, the elasticity of his mind asserted itself more and more. As a matter of fact, a great deal of sympathy was expressed for him; several of his clients, indeed, went out of their way to assure him of their

undiminished confidence and regard. No one for an instant suspected there was anything wrong with the firm. The death of Thornton was looked upon as an inexplicable fatality, that of Silwood as another.

In these reassuring circumstances he took heart of grace, plucked up courage, and said to himself that he must make a decided change in his own habits and methods, and must no longer be easy-going, careless, and unsystematic, but must work doubly hard, and do whatever lay in his power to save the situation. But a man's character is not changed in a day, and Francis Eversleigh, despite his brave resolutions, was, at bottom, the same Francis Eversleigh. And with all the heart in the world to retrieve lost ground, it was hardly possible for him to do it, even if his affairs had been in a different position.

His most pressing duty, he knew, was to make that examination into the business of his firm which he had purposed making earlier. One morning towards the end of the week in which the verdict was given, he came to his office determined to commence a thorough overhauling of his accounts, but his innate weakness prevented him from persevering. And, in addition to the slackness habitual to him, there was another reason that kept him back. And this reason was Williamson.

Had Eversleigh been a strong man, he would have made the death of his partner an excuse for this examination—so natural an excuse, in truth, that Williamson would have thought nothing of it. But he had not got very far in examining the books when he became aware that the head-clerk was following all he did with suspicious interest. The mere fact that Eversleigh was manifesting unusual activity was enough to excite

surprise in Williamson. The first shock which the returning complacency of the solicitor received came from the thought that perhaps Williamson had a glimmering of the truth.

Then Eversleigh could not do much in the way of investigation without referring to Williamson for information. In any case, Eversleigh saw with fatal distinctness, that if this process were continued, the result could be no other than to put Williamson in possession of the whole circumstances of the firm. Conscious of this, his good resolves suffered eclipse, and he once more fell back on the desperate policy of letting things drift whither they would. But, for a week or two, matters at 176, New Square, Lincoln's Inn, went on as if nothing out of the common had happened, or was likely to happen. Francis Eversleigh, his son Ernest, the head-clerk Williamson, and the other clerks, occupied their accustomed seats in their accustomed rooms. People came and went as usual; deeds were prepared, documents drawn up, and all the machinery of the office seemed to be in excellent running order. No shadow of approaching doom darkened the firm's doors.

Still, Eversleigh knew that he could not continue his policy of drifting beyond a certain point. It was part of his unescapable misfortune that the severest pressure on him came in one way or another from members of his own unsuspecting family.

In the first place, it was necessary to get another partner in place of Silwood. This, on various pretexts, which gave him delay, he put off. He knew that Ernest must expect to be taken into partnership at this juncture when a suitable opportunity presented itself. But to make Ernest a partner meant involving

the young man in the ruin of the firm—if ruin came, and Eversleigh in his heart now believed that it was inevitable—and he was minded not to do this if it could be helped. But it was difficult for him to resist the pressure brought to bear upon him. His wife spoke to him of Ernest, but he managed to quiet her with the promise that before long the matter would be satisfactorily arranged. And this was the easier, inasmuch as the poor lady, who had seen the improvement in her husband's state of health after the verdict, believed Ernest had only to wait a few weeks and all would be well.

But the improvement in Francis Eversleigh's bodily and mental health was only, could be only temporary. Already drifting like a rudderless ship, he might any moment founder on the rocks. Deeply involved in a course of equivocation and deceit, to which there could be but one end, unless some miracle occurred, the necessity of continuing in it, added to the other circumstances of his situation, soon changed the transient brightness of his spirits into the gloom of that settled and terrible melancholy which had descended upon him before. In vain he strove to fight against it, to overcome it; his efforts were utterly useless.

The most serious things he had to consider were the Thornton Estate and the Silwood Estate.

With regard to the latter, he well knew there was no such thing as a Silwood Estate at all, but he deemed it essential for the sake of keeping up appearances to make a pretence that there was such an estate—at least, until it became evident there was none. Here the "law's delays," of which he took full advantage, assisted him; but then there was Williamson endlessly

curious and prying. Some of the questions he put to his principal were hard to answer, and drove Eversleigh to the verge of madness.

Silwood's room in the office, the japanned box—always excepting the secret cavity of which no one knew—the whole office, and finally Silwood's chambers in Stone Buildings, now free from the embargo of the law, had been carefully searched for the will of the dead solicitor; but no will had been found. Williamson openly said that the absence of a will in the case of a man who must have been rich, and who was a lawyer to boot, was a most singular thing. Undoubtedly it was this that suggested to the head-clerk something of the actual fact, namely, that there was a screw loose with respect to the financial position of the firm. But, as before, he had nothing definite to go on, and he never dreamed that the affairs of the house were in the desperate condition they really were.

But it was the Thornton Estate which troubled Eversleigh most of all.

Gilbert, as the affianced husband of Kitty, spoke to his father soon after the inquest about Morris Thornton's property, and asked him if Thornton's will was deposited in the office, or if the agents in Canada had it.

Francis knew there was a will in the office, and was tolerably sure no other was in existence, but Gilbert's query gave him a chance of standing him off on the whole subject for a considerable time. He snatched at it eagerly.

"We have a will of his," he said to his son, "but it was executed a good many years ago. I am, in the circumstances in which you stand towards Kitty,

betraying no confidence when I tell you that by that will he left everything of which he was possessed to her. But it is quite possible there may be a later will. That is a matter for inquiry. It will certainly be necessary for us to wait till we hear from the agents in British Columbia. They have been apprized by cable and by letter of Mr. Thornton's death, and they must have seen something of it in the papers—the noise of it has gone round the world. But we must not move until we have heard from them. In the event of its being reasonably sure that there is no other will, we will, of course, submit the one we have to probate as soon as may be. I don't think we can do more at present."

"I understand," said Gilbert; "you will just observe the usual routine. I suppose it will be some weeks, perhaps a month or two, before anything further can be done. Still, I imagine you can get all the affairs of his that are in your hands into the best order."

"Oh," said Eversleigh, with an attempt at lightness, "that is all right. Mr. Silwood had charge of them, and now I have."

"I have no doubt, sir, they are all right," said Gilbert, unsuspiciously.

"Yes, yes. I should say in a month or six weeks we can go to probate, but it will depend, of course, upon what we hear from Vancouver. You may be sure there will be no unnecessary delay."

"I am certain of that," assented Gilbert, readily, unvisited by the slightest inkling of his father's state of mind.

Similar pretexts were used by Eversleigh in dealing with Ernest and Williamson. And so a little time was

gained, but it was to very small purpose. Once more the strain on him was fast becoming past endurance.

A fortnight, three weeks, went by, and Eversleigh had relapsed altogether into his former condition of deepest dejection, to the alarm of his wife and relatives, who wondered what in the world could account for it. But though he had gained respites in the matters that disquieted him most seriously, he knew that at most and best they were but respites, and likely to be short ones. He saw the day of reckoning drawing nearer and nearer; that it should come in all probability through his son Gilbert and Kitty, whom he loved as his own child, was an aggravation of his sufferings.

It had been the custom of the Eversleighs to betake themselves to the seaside during the month of August, but this year, because of all that had happened, it had not been observed. Francis Eversleigh was entreated by his family to take a brief holiday, but he declined on the plea there was too much work at the office. He, on the other hand, besought his wife to go away for a change, but she would not, with the result that the Eversleighs and Kitty stayed on at Surbiton.

It was now that Kitty, more than all the rest, showed her affection for him by devoting herself assiduously to his comfort in the most marked manner. The girl was fond of him for his own sake, and was he not Gilbert's father? In many little ways she tried to cheer him, and to drive away the dark shadow that enveloped him. And all these loving attentions were so many fresh stabs to the miserable man.

As the days ran on, Eversleigh was a prey to constant apprehensions; he was haunted by the dread, from

moment to moment, of something happening which would lead to exposure.

And come it did, but from an unexpected quarter.

It came in the form of a demand for a large sum of money, and it came from Harry Bennet, a man whom Eversleigh had almost forgotten, particularly as Harry had for some time been a stranger at Ivydene.

This demand meant ruin.

CHAPTER XIX

The demand from Bennet was contained in a short letter, and the sum he asked for was ten thousand pounds.

With a curt explanation that a horse on which he had put a great deal of money had disappointed him, he said it was now necessary for him to have this amount immediately. He went on to say that he knew they, his solicitors, had no ready money of his in their hands, but they would undoubtedly be able to advance it on the security of Beauclerk Mansions, which he directed them to sell. However, to sell them to the best advantage might take some time. Would they, therefore, anticipate the proceeds of the sale to the extent of the sum asked for, and repay themselves afterwards when the sale was effected? He was sure that the Mansions would fetch far more than ten thousand pounds.

Though the period had been marked by events so important as to cause it to seem of considerable length, but a few weeks in reality had elapsed since Harry Bennet had proposed to and been rejected by Kitty Thornton. Like all the world, Bennet was not ignorant of what had happened in the Eversleigh circle, but he was completely absorbed by his turf speculations.

He had not quite forgotten his purpose of being revenged on Gilbert, but for the time it slumbered.

After Goodwood, all through the month of August, Bennet followed the round of race-meetings with unimpaired zest; sometimes he was successful in his bets, but far more frequently he was a heavy loser. He had soon spent the considerable sum he had made during his Goodwood campaign, and now was hard pressed for funds. He had already managed to dissipate the whole of his once extensive patrimony, with the exception of the large block of flats called Beauclerk Mansions, which he now told his solicitors to put on the market.

In ordinary circumstances there would have been no difficulty in getting an immediate advance on the property, which was worth far more than ten thousand pounds, as Bennet said. But Cooper Silwood had changed all that.

Williamson, who now watched, as a cat a mouse, Eversleigh as he had watched Silwood, had put the letter into his principal's hand with the remark that it was such a pity Mr. Bennet was ruining himself; he seemed bent on going headlong to destruction!

Francis Eversleigh merely nodded, read the letter, and said dully that he would attend to the matter himself presently.

At first he was not without hope that all was well, and that the advance could be procured. But a brief examination showed him that Beauclerk Mansions no longer stood in Bennet's name—they had been sold during the preceding year, as he shortly discovered, by Silwood. Amongst other things, this of course meant that Silwood had forged Bennet's signature. But, at

the moment, Eversleigh did not stop to think of it; the one damning fact which stood forth with frightful distinctness was that Beauclerk Mansions were already sold.

"What am I to do?" groaned Eversleigh.

He considered if there was any way by which he could raise the money; but ten thousand pounds is a large sum, even to a rich man, when it has to be put down in cold cash. Still, the credit of the firm was unimpaired, and for a few brief moments Eversleigh permitted himself the luxury of imagining his bankers would advance the amount. But he knew they would not do so without security, and he was certain he had none to offer. Silwood had taken care of that.

"What am I to do? In Heaven's name, what am I to do?" Eversleigh asked himself, while his heart seemed to be contracting under the unrelenting grip of a hand of iron.

Ruin, black ruin!

It was coming very near, very near!

And worse than ruin.

Infamy!

Again, as often before, he saw the convict's cell, the desolate home, the wife and children whom he loved for ever disgraced.

The cold sweat of terror, of despair, stood on the brows of the wretched man, who shook and trembled as with palsy. He had a swooning sense that he was standing in the midst of a dissolving world, a wreck amidst a myriad of wrecks all whirling on to some dark abyss. He felt as if his brain were giving way under these repeated shocks; then a merciful blankness and

vacuity of thought and impression suddenly descended upon him.

Williamson, coming into the room later, found Eversleigh in a faint stretched across the table.

The head-clerk regarded his principal curiously; then he proceeded, before attempting to resuscitate Eversleigh, to look carefully over the papers lying on the table. Amongst them, however, he saw nothing that was of a specially suspicious character, unless it was Bennet's letter. Having satisfied himself on this point, Williamson next endeavoured to revive his master.

"I am afraid you're trying to do too much," he observed to Eversleigh, when the latter had recovered. "Now that Mr. Silwood is gone, your work is doubled."

"Oh, I'm all right now; it was just a passing weakness," replied Eversleigh. Then he noticed Bennet's letter and glancing from it to Williamson, said, "I must not forget to see about getting the money as soon as possible for Mr. Bennet. I don't suppose there will be much trouble about getting it. But it will take a day or two to arrange."

"In the mean time," asked Williamson, "shall I look out the deeds of the property?"

"No," replied Eversleigh, with a shiver, which he tried to hide successfully; "there will be time enough for that when I have got the advance arranged for."

"Yes, sir; but should not a notice of the sale be drawn up at once, and the matter otherwise put in shape?"

"I am not without hope," said Eversleigh, slowly, "that there may, after all, be no necessity to sell the Mansions. It's a fine property, and it would be a good thing if Mr. Bennet could keep it. A mortgage for

the ten thousand may be sufficient. I'll mention that when I write Mr. Bennet to-day."

Williamson bowed and retired, mutely asking himself what was the particular thing or reason that had so affected his principal as to cause him to faint. Could it be, in any way, he wondered, connected with Bennet? No; on reflection, he thought it could not be that, for Eversleigh's references to the matter had been quite natural. Yet the head-clerk opined there must be some reason.

"I believe," he told himself, after long consideration, "the best course for me to pursue would be to resign and get out of it all.

But he did not resign.

That afternoon Eversleigh wrote Bennet a reply in which he stated the loan Bennet required would doubtless be obtained very soon, but two or three days might elapse before the preliminaries were concluded. Then he expressed the hope that a mortgage on the Mansions for ten thousand pounds might be enough to extricate Bennet from his difficulties, and in that case the sale need not be proceeded with. But if the Mansions must be sold, he trusted plenty of time for advertising would be allowed, otherwise they might have to be disposed of at a considerable sacrifice.

In a word, it was exactly the kind of letter a solicitor who had nothing behind in his mind, would write a client in Bennet's position.

Here, again, Eversleigh was playing for a respite; but here, again, he did not deceive himself—he knew that the end was fast approaching.

The bitterness of death took hold of him. When he went home that evening he scarcely touched any

food. As soon as dinner was over, he rose from the table, and, saying he would go out for a walk by the river, left Ivydene. For a long time he paced up and down in a great agony of mind. Three courses were open to him. One was to go on as long as possible—till the crash came. The second was to file his petition in bankruptcy, in which case exposure was inevitable. The third lay before him—in the broad bosom of the river gliding past him; a plunge, and all would be over.

The last, as a final solution of all his difficulties, had a strong attraction. It seemed so easy, and called for so small an effort. There was a fascination in the flowing water, in its softly murmurous motion. He looked at the river, and then dared not look longer. It seemed to cry to him, "Come to me! come to me!" Then he strode away from it into the high-road; but it drew him back again, for still he heard it calling, calling, "Come to me! come to me!"

Moving out of the shadows of the trees on the terrace, he walked slowly, listening to that sinister voice, while he looked at the dark spaces of the water where the river lay in its deepest pools.

But as he walked, still within the shadows, he came upon a pair of lovers, and he stopped to watch them.

The lovers were his son Gilbert and Kitty Thornton.

Their faces looked forward along the path, and they did not see the man standing in the shadows. The girl leaned lightly on Gilbert's arm, and was speaking low and softly to him. As she uttered the words, Gilbert patted the little hand that rested on his arm.

On Kitty's face was something that had not been

there a month or two before, and which now imparted to it a touch of gravity. Perhaps her face was just a little sad. And yet she was not feeling sad, for the man in the shadows heard her say—

"Oh, Gilbert, it is good to be in love! Life now would not be worth living without love."

A passing boat attracted the attention of the pair, and they stood to observe it. Behind them was Francis Eversleigh.

"I feel as if I could not exist without you now, Gilbert," said the girl, moving on again.

"Nor I without you, darling," answered Gilbert, tenderly.

Then in silence they went on their way.

When they were out of hearing, Francis Eversleigh heaved a great sigh, and followed them with tottering steps. The siren voice of the river had died out from his ears; it called him no longer.

"I must struggle on to the end," he said, and returned to his house.

About noon next day, Bennet, who had pressing reasons for getting at once the ten thousand pounds he had asked for, looked in at 176, New Square, Lincoln's Inn, and requested to see Francis Eversleigh.

"How are you, Harry?" inquired Eversleigh, when he saw him.

Bennet had not seen the other for a considerable time, and he was immensely struck by the altered appearance of the solicitor, so he answered that he was very well, but regretted to notice that Mr. Eversleigh appeared to be in poor health.

"Well," said Eversleigh; "you have no doubt heard I've had much of a painful nature—Mr. Silwood's

death and Mr. Thornton's—to try me recently. I have felt these blows very keenly."

"Of course you would," responded Bennet. "About this money, Mr. Eversleigh, I am sorry to trouble you, but I must have it at once."

"At once!"

"Yes, to-day if possible."

"It's not possible."

"Then to-morrow. I should like you to push on with the sale of Beauclerk Mansions. I do not desire a mortgage on the property. It must be sold outright."

"But, Harry——"

"Pray spare me, Mr. Eversleigh. I know you wish to expostulate with me, and I know the kindness which inspires you to do so, but I have quite made up my mind. Can I have the money to-morrow?"

"I'm afraid not, Harry. It's not so very easy to raise so large a sum in a day or two—there are all sorts of formalities, you know."

"It ought not to be difficult, surely. These Kensington properties are first-rate and should find ready purchasers. And Beauclerk Mansions are in the best situation too. I am certain they must be in splendid order, for I never receive complaints now from the tenants. You remember that two or three years ago the tenants often sent me complaints direct instead of writing to you. Well, there has been nothing of the sort for a long while. I know Mr. Silwood was a splendid manager. What a pity it is you lost him! I haven't been near Beauclerk Mansions for many a month —no need, you know, thanks to Mr. Silwood's ability. I am sorry to lose the property, but go it must.

I suppose it will realize thirty or forty thousand, won't it?"

"I dare say it will."

"Then an advance of ten thousand should be easy to get."

"Yes, yes," agreed Eversleigh; "but it will take a few days."

"I must have it to-morrow, sir—to-morrow. I cannot wait any further than that."

"Well, I'll do what I can," said Eversleigh, with a choking gasp; "I'll do what I can."

"I'm certain you will be able to manage it," said Bennet, rising and going to the door. There he stopped and turned to Eversleigh. "Do you know," he said; "I think I'll run down on the Underground to High Street, and take a look at Beauclerk Mansions—a last fond look," he added with a grin and disappeared.

At four o'clock in the same day he was back again at Lincoln's Inn, and there was a strange expression on his face as he climbed the stairs to Francis Eversleigh's room.

CHAPTER XX

As Bennet entered the room, Eversleigh looked at him and forced a smile, but he turned livid when he observed the other's aspect. There was no smile on Bennet's face, but something disquieting and even threatening appeared upon it. Eversleigh, seeing it, said to himself that the expected day of reckoning had indeed come. His first feeling was almost one of relief, but that soon gave way to a determination to make as much of a stand as he could. He tried to encourage himself by thinking that Bennet had always been a friend of his and of his family. Unaware that Kitty had preferred Gilbert to Bennet, and of the sentiments Bennet now had with respect to his son, he had some hope that it might be possible to "do something with Harry," as he phrased it vaguely to himself.

"Well, Harry, back again?" he said, trying with a prodigious effort to speak calmly. "I did not anticipate seeing you so soon."

"Yes, Mr. Eversleigh," remarked Bennet, bluntly; "I have returned pretty quickly, because I desired to see you immediately with a view to asking you for an explanation of a circumstance which puzzles me extremely. Still, I dare say you can clear the matter up. It is about Beauclerk Mansions. I have just come from them this very minute."

As Bennet had come in Eversleigh had stood up; he now sank into his chair. Harry remained on his feet, gazing at the solicitor, and there was a note of anger in his voice as he addressed Eversleigh.

"An explanation, Harry," said Eversleigh, waving Bennet to take a seat beside him. "About what?"

"Well, Mr. Eversleigh," said Bennet, drily, "when I left you this morning I told you I would take a run down to the Mansions to have a last look at them; do you remember?"

"You made some little jest of it," returned Eversleigh, nervously.

"Yes; I was trying to appear light-hearted about it? I was not light-hearted really. But that does not matter in the slightest degree. I did go to the Mansions——"

Bennet stopped, as he was in doubt what to say next.

"You went to Beauclerk Mansions?" said Everleigh; "and——"

"I'll tell you as exactly as I can what took place. On the pretext of inquiring if there was a flat to be let, I got into conversation with one of the porters. I saw the man did not know who I was. He told me there were two or three desirable flats vacant; would I care to look over them? I don't know quite why I did it, but I thought I would take a glance at the vacant flats, keeping the porter in talk the while. You follow me?" asked Harry, breaking off as he saw the eyes of the solicitor wandered over the room.

Eversleigh was listening, but not carefully; he guessed well enough what Bennet would tell him, and he was casting about for some appeal that would touch Bennet and induce him to stay his hand.

"Oh yes," he responded; "I am following you perfectly, Harry."

"As I went over the flats with the porter," Bennet resumed, "I noticed the property was in very good order, and I remarked to the man that it must be well managed and be very valuable. The porter replied that the property was well managed, especially since the new management had taken it up. I was surprised, as you may imagine, to hear of a new management, but I naturally supposed that you or rather Mr. Silwood, had made the change. I asked how long the new management had been in power, and was told it had been for about a year."

Bennet paused, gazed at Eversleigh, and repeated, "About a year."

"About a year," said Eversleigh, mechanically.

"The porter went on to say," continued Bennet, "that he understood the property had been in new hands for that time, and that was why it was in such good order—the new broom was sweeping cleaner than the old. When he spoke of the property being in new hands, I thought it more than a bit odd, and I asked him in whose hands the property now was. He gave me the name of a firm of house-agents of whom I have heard before, but not in connection with your firm, Mr. Eversleigh. This surprised me again, and I put the question if he knew who was the owner of the property, and he answered that it belonged to a company, named 'Modern Mansions, Limited.' When he said this, I looked at him in amazement, but I saw that he was in earnest, and stated what he believed to be true."

Again Bennet stopped and fixed his gaze on

Eversleigh, but the solicitor said not a word—he opened his lips as if to speak, but remained silent.

"You do not speak, Mr. Eversleigh!" cried Bennet. "Well, let me finish my story. He had told me that the property belonged to 'Modern Mansions, Limited,' and he so surprised me that I blurted out that I thought he must be wrong, and that I had understood it was owned by a Mr. Bennet, whose father had been the original proprietor. 'No,' said the man; 'it did belong to him, but he sold it to the company just about twelve months ago!'"

Bennet paused once more, as if to give Eversleigh an opportunity of making a remark, but he did not avail himself of it.

"Still you do not speak!" cried Bennet. "But to finish with my yarn. I felt positively certain that the porter was making a big mistake, as I knew I had not sold Beauclerk Mansions, but I thought I would carry my inquiries a step further. Therefore, keeping up the pretence of wanting a flat, I asked the porter if he could get me a copy of the agreement or form of lease for a flat; no doubt, I said, there was a regular form to be had in the office of the company. That was so, he thought; would I go with him to the manager's office? Well, I did go, and I got the form; here it is," said Bennet, taking a printed paper from his pocket and placing it before Eversleigh.

"Not that there was any need of that as proof the Mansions were mine no longer," Bennet continued. "I had a short talk with the manager, and I soon had no doubt about it. Now, Mr. Eversleigh, you have heard what I have said. I demand an explanation from you. What have you to say?"

Eversleigh looked at Bennet, then at the ceiling, then at the floor, but could not find speech.

"Have you nothing to say? What meaning, Mr. Eversleigh, am I to place on your silence? Why don't you speak?"

Hitherto Bennet, believing like all the rest of the world that there could be nothing wrong with so eminent a firm as Eversleigh, Silwood and Eversleigh, had supposed there might be some explanation of these curious circumstances; he was suspicious, but imagined there might be a possible justification. What he could not understand was why Eversleigh had written and spoken to him as if the Mansions were still his. Eversleigh's silence now told him quite unmistakably there was something very wrong about the whole matter.

"Why don't you speak, Mr. Eversleigh?" he asked, roughly, springing from his chair and towering over the solicitor.

"Harry," began Eversleigh, brokenly, shrinking before the angry eyes of his client, "Harry, your property, as you know, was in Mr. Silwood's department of the office. Mr. Silwood——"

But Eversleigh paused tongue-tied; there was a slackening of the muscles of his face. He seemed on the point of collapse.

As Bennet regarded the solicitor the expression of his face become horrible; all the evil of his life seemed suddenly stamped upon it; it was cruel, fierce, brutal, devilish. He saw that Eversleigh had no explanation to offer; he realized that he had been the victim of fraud, and that his property was gone—it had been stolen from him by his solicitors! As this came home

to him, his mood was little short of murderous, and it must be admitted there was some excuse for him.

"Silwood's death," he said harshly, "does not matter to me in the least. He is dead, and it is you that I have to deal with. What has become of my property?"

Harry's rough tones made Eversleigh shrink still more, but he managed to speak.

"Mr. Silwood is dead," he quavered, wishing the while that he was dead too. "But his death is so recent that there has not been sufficient time to go into all his affairs."

"I care nothing for his affairs. What has become of my property? Tell me that."

"You must know, Harry, that Mr. Silwood's death has made a great difference to me."

"It has nothing to do with me. What has become of my property?"

"It is possible," said Eversleigh, weakly, "that there may have been things in his department that are slightly irregular. No doubt," he went on more firmly, "he thought he was acting in your best interests when he sold your property."

"Sold my property," repeated Bennet, with a fierce snarl. "If he sold it, what did he sell it for? And where is the money?"

Eversleigh was mute.

"Again you have nothing to say! Now I ask you just one question. Did you know, or did you not know, when you wrote me yesterday that you would procure the advance of ten thousand pounds on the property, that it had been sold already? Answer me!"

Bennet's eyes blazed with rage and menace as he thundered the last words at Eversleigh.

Eversleigh partly rose from his chair, clutching as he did so at his collar; then he sat down with a loud groan, covered his face with his hands, and broke into sobs.

Bennet stood over him and shook him violently.

"You did know," he shouted. "You knew all the while that my flats had been sold. Do you know what you are? You are a thief and a swindler—that's what you are!"

"Harry," pleaded Eversleigh, feebly.

"Don't call me 'Harry,'" replied Bennet. "You have lied to me and stolen from me. I must think," he wound up, as he released his hold of the other and walked up and down the floor.

Meanwhile Eversleigh's sobs subsided, and he ventured to look at Bennet. Bennet noticed the glance at once.

"I believe," said he, "if I did what I ought to do, I should have you arrested at once for fraud; but I don't see that that would do me any good."

"Harry," said Eversleigh, haltingly, "I was your father's friend, and I was never unkind to you."

"Never unkind to me! What have you done with my money?"

"I never had a penny of it."

"Oh, you put the blame on Silwood! He is dead, and cannot deny the charge."

"I never had anything to do with selling your property, Harry. I did not know it had been sold until a day or two ago—until yesterday, in fact."

"But you did know when you wrote me. You lied about it."

"I did," acknowledged Eversleigh. "I could not help it. Consider how I was situated!"

"You were to get me the ten thousand pounds, and to pretend to sell the Mansions?"

"That was it."

"You can get me the ten thousand?"

"No; that was a pretence too. I cannot get you the money."

"Worse and worse!" exclaimed Bennet. "What has been done with the money?"

"Mr. Silwood might have told you, I cannot. I had none of it, I again assure you," protested Eversleigh.

Bennet now sat down.

"Let us understand each other," he said. "So far as I make the matter out, the position is this: you state Mr. Silwood disposed of my property and appropriated the proceeds—is that it?"

Eversleigh bowed.

"What do you intend doing?"

"Nothing. What can I do?"

Bennet sat very still, thinking what was the best course for him to take.

"Do you suppose," he asked at length, "that Mr. Silwood was guilty of other—irregularities?"

"How can I tell? For many years Mr. Silwood attended to all the financial business of the firm, and I never concerned myself with it at all. And now I can only find out very slowly and gradually how matters stand."

"Have you no capital? No means of your own?"

"No. I have always lived up to my income—you know how I have lived, Harry, for you have often shared my hospitality," said Eversleigh, appealingly.

"Oh, your hospitality be ——!" cried Bennet,

rudely. "How does that help either you or me now? If anything, it makes matters worse. What I ought to do is just what I said. I should go to another solicitor, tell him how the case stands, and in a short time you would be in prison. But what good will that be to me? I must think everything over very carefully. I shall not be precipitate."

Eversleigh held up his head a little.

"Thank you, Harry," he said.

"I'm not thinking of you," rejoined Harry, brutally. "One word, however. How many people know about my property being disposed of—in this irregular manner by Silwood?" asked Bennet, sarcastically.

"No one but myself."

"Can I depend on that statement?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, I shall take no action to-day. I am going home now, and to-night I'll make up my mind. I shall see you again to-morrow, and tell you what is my intention."

And Bennet strode out of the room. As he descended the stairs he almost cannoned against Gilbert Eversleigh, who was going up to see his father. Bennet hardly returned the salute Gilbert gave him, but the sight of his successful rival had given him an idea.

CHAPTER XXI

"I SHALL see you again to-morrow, and tell you what is my intention," were the words with which Bennet had left Eversleigh, and they rang in the ears of the solicitor like a knell. He knew he was in Bennet's power, and as he thought of Harry and the character of the young man he told himself it was useless to expect mercy or even consideration of any kind.

"The day of reckoning," he moaned, "has indeed come."

He asked himself if there was any one to whom he could appeal for assistance in his extremity; but he could think of no one, and even if such a friend had existed, it would now be too late to appeal to him for help, because Bennet knew enough—and more than enough—to send him to prison.

This was in his mind when Gilbert, passing up the stairs on which he had encountered Bennet, came into his father's room. For one moment he had a wild notion to tell his son everything, but quickly decided against it.

"I met Harry Bennet just now," remarked Gilbert, "and he seemed in a bad humour, to judge from the glance with which he favoured me. I suppose you have been giving him a lecture?"

Giving Bennet a lecture!

The irony of the thing smote Francis Eversleigh. Again he wondered if he should tell Gilbert everything, and put some of the burden on the strong shoulders of his son; but no, he could not do it. And what could Gilbert do to help him?"

"Oh no," said Eversleigh, in reply to Gilbert's question; "I did not lecture him. He wanted money at a moment's notice, and I told him he must wait a little."

"I see," responded Gilbert, and the conversation passed to other topics.

When Francis Eversleigh went home to Ivydene that evening he believed it more than probable that he was going to it for the last time for many years, as he felt certain Bennet would have him arrested next day. After a sleepless night of agony and remorse, he took a mute but infinitely pathetic farewell of the place and the loved ones whose abode it was, before leaving it.

"D'you think you are well enough to go to the office to-day?" asked his wife, doubtfully.

"Yes, dear," he replied, with more than usual tenderness in his voice. "I'm quite well, and perhaps since Mr. Silwood's death, I give in too much to business worries; but there is nothing really the matter."

And he embraced her very fondly after he had said this, wondering in his heart what she would think of him when she knew the truth, as she likely would that very day.

Then he went to meet his fate.

His fate proved to be better and worse than he had expected.

The solicitor had scarcely arrived at 176, New Square, Lincoln's Inn, when Bennet made his appearance.

"Well, Harry," said Eversleigh, timidly, on seeing him.

"I have thought this business over," Bennet declared, "and I have come to a determination. I shall not prosecute you. I shall take no action in the matter, but there's a condition."

Francis Eversleigh could hardly believe his ears when he heard Bennet's words, "I shall not prosecute you."

Involuntarily he gave a great sigh of relief.

But then there was a condition, Bennet had said. What was it? He was thunderstruck when he heard what it was.

"I am willing not to prosecute you," continued Bennet, coolly, "on one condition, and on one condition alone. You have acknowledged your guilt, but there is one way in which you may make good your—debt, let us call it—to me."

"Yes?" asked Eversleigh, as Harry stopped for an instant.

"It is the case," said Harry, speaking sharply, "is it not, that your son Gilbert is engaged to Miss Thornton?"

"Certainly," replied Eversleigh, in a puzzled tone.

"You have a great deal of influence with your son?"

"Naturally."

"You and he are on the best of terms—many fathers and sons are not—but you and Gilbert are very good friends."

"Undoubtedly."

"If I prosecute you, you will be convicted and sentenced?"

Eversleigh did not answer.

"Your conviction," Bennet went on remorselessly, "will infallibly cover Gilbert with disgrace, to say nothing of the other members of your family; his career at the Bar will be blighted. Is that not the case?"

Dry-lipped Eversleigh heard, but he could not trust himself to answer.

"Gilbert will be ruined—you know that is so. Now, do you think, with this hanging over him, he is a proper person to marry Miss Thornton? Of course, he is not."

Eversleigh groaned.

"Harry, spare me!" he cried.

But Bennet had no idea of sparing him.

"Your son Gilbert must not marry Miss Thornton; you must prevent him from doing so. Do you understand?"

"But this is monstrous, Harry," protested Eversleigh; "my influence over Gilbert is not great enough for this."

"If that is so, then so much the worse for you. But not only must you use your influence with Gilbert, you must also bring it to bear on Miss Thornton. You must tell her that she must not marry Gilbert. Now, do you understand?"

"I understand," returned Eversleigh, speaking for the first time during the conversation with some firmness; "but what you wish is impossible. Gilbert and Miss Thornton love each other. Gilbert is a man, he

is not a child, and Miss Thornton is a woman and not a child either. Is it likely that anything I said to them would make them break off their engagement?"

"Gilbert and Miss Thornton love each other!"

These words were gall and wormwood to Bennet.

The sight of Gilbert the previous afternoon had revived his dormant desire for revenge, and after much thought he had come to the conclusion to tell Francis Eversleigh that the price of his silence with regard to the fraudulent sale of Beauclerk Mansions was that the solicitor must use pressure to get the match broken off, and not only that, but also to induce the girl to marry him. It was rather a mad scheme, and if Bennet had really considered it fully he would probably have decided against suggesting it. It never struck him that he was conniving at fraud; if it had, he would not have been deterred. He was a headstrong, reckless man, determined to get his own way, rightly or wrongly, and to get it whatever happened.

"Wait," he said; "I have not finished yet. You must break off the match. How it is to be done I leave to you. You will find some means of doing it. The main point is that it be done. There must be no misunderstanding on that head. But there is more to be said: you must not only break off the match, but you must forward my suit with Miss Thornton."

"Your suit with Miss Thornton!" cried Eversleigh.

"Yes; perhaps you were not aware that I proposed to her, but I was too late. She had already accepted your son. You never heard that she rejected me?"

"I did not know it."

Eversleigh's thoughts went back to that day—the

awful, fateful day in which Silwood had confessed his embezzlements—on which he had given Gilbert a hint of Bennet's advances to Kitty, and how, at the time he had given it, life stretched before him bright and fair. He shuddered as he recalled all that had happened since.

Bennet, watching him intently, saw the shudder that shook the frame of the solicitor, and, not knowing what was passing through the other's mind, misinterpreted it.

"The idea of my proposing to Miss Thornton makes you shudder, is that it?" he asked fiercely and angrily. "It becomes you well—you, the cheat, the embezzler, the swindler."

Eversleigh looked at Bennet helplessly.

"You disapprove of me, you dare to disapprove of me for her!" Bennet continued. "Surely I am as good as your son!" he exclaimed with violence, "the son of a thief!"

"Gilbert is as honest as the day," said Eversleigh, stung into speech.

"I know nothing about that," cried Bennet, scornfully. "But this is all beside the mark. Gilbert is nothing to me; why should I consider him? He stands between me and Kitty Thornton, and it will be your part to remove him from my path."

"How am I to do it? How am I to do it?" wailed Eversleigh.

Bennet regarded him with contempt.

"That lies with you," he said pitilessly. "I have already made that quite clear. And you must speak to Miss Thornton and tell her—oh, tell her anything, but tell her that she must marry me."

"Suppose I did tell her that, do you imagine that it would weigh with her, if it was not backed by some very strong, some overwhelming reason?" asked Eversleigh, struggling to speak calmly with the young man. "And what reason can I give? I cannot perform impossibilities. Surely you must admit that?"

"I admit nothing," snarled Bennet viciously.

The two men looked at each other; Eversleigh's face bore a hopeless and beaten expression, Bennet's was savage and implacable.

For a space there was silence between them.

On Bennet Eversleigh's last words had made a certain impression, and he was asking himself if, after all, his scheme would not work: he felt not the least pity or compassion; but what if he had indeed set Eversleigh a task beyond his powers to accomplish? As he conversed with Eversleigh, he saw that what in his own home the previous evening had seemed a simple enough thing, was not simple at all. He saw that if Eversleigh, at his bidding, told the lovers that the match must be broken off, it did not at all follow they would consent—unless they were told that in this way, and this only, Eversleigh would be delivered from some great and imminent danger. "Well," he thought, "that is what Eversleigh must do, and for the same reason Kitty must be brought to consent to marry me."

"You will speak to your son and Miss Thornton to-night?" Bennet said aloud.

"To-night!"

"Why not? The sooner the better, surely!"

"Harry," said Eversleigh, making a last effort, "just consider the position."

"What else am I doing?" Bennet broke out rudely.

"Have patience a moment, if not for my sake, then for your own. You wish me to tell Gilbert, whom by the way I shall not see to-night, that he must have his engagement with Miss Thornton cancelled. Gilbert knows perfectly that his marriage with Miss Thornton is the thing next my heart, and he will require from me an explanation. Am I to tell him the truth? And it is the same in Miss Thornton's case. Am I to tell her the truth also?"

"Certainly. Why not, pray?" asked Bennet, ruthlessly.

"I do not believe Gilbert will consent."

"He will, fast enough, to save you; for in saving you is he not saving himself and his career?"

"But Miss Thornton," argued Eversleigh, "is not my child. She is of age. She is her own mistress. I have no power over her. How can I compel her to marry you?"

Bennet stood in sullen silence.

"She would marry me to save you from a convict's cell," he said at last. "But as I understand you to mean that you will not speak to her on this matter, I tell you what I'll do. I shall go to her myself, and tell her all I know. If she consents to marry me, then I shall spare you; if she refuses—you can guess for yourself what will take place. And this is my last word," added Bennet, and stalked out of the room.

CHAPTER XXII

On leaving Francis Eversleigh, whose feelings at the turn events had taken were poignant beyond description, Harry Bennet went as fast and as straight to Surbiton as the train could carry him. As he neared Ivydene, he was visited by some slight compunctions, but these he soon overcame and thrust out of his mind.

On inquiring if Miss Thornton was at home, he was told by the maid, to whom Bennet was no stranger, that Miss Thornton and Miss Helen Eversleigh were out, but were expected in very shortly. Mrs. Eversleigh, however, was in; would he not come in and see her? But Bennet, who had no wish to see Mrs. Eversleigh, excused himself and withdrew. He did not go far away, but hung about the house waiting till the two young ladies should appear. And presently, when they came into view, Bennet at once went to meet them.

When the girls saw him, they beheld him with very different emotions. There was a smile of welcome on Helen's face, which showed she was glad to see him again, and that perhaps also she still, in her heart, was not ill disposed towards him; at the same time, she wondered why he had not been near Ivydene for so long a time, and this imparted a certain eagerness to her greeting of him. But Kitty received him coldly. Both the girls

were in deep mourning, and Bennet thought he had never seen Kitty look better. The coldness of his reception he put down to the grief she must be feeling for her father, and for an instant he was inclined to doubt if this were the proper time to speak to her on the subject which had brought him to Surbiton, but his hesitation was soon over.

There was something strange and unnatural in Bennet's manner as he saluted the girls. So marked was it that even Helen Eversleigh could not help noticing it. Kitty observed it instantly, and she drew an augury of evil from it. Since her rejection of the young man she had almost forgotten his existence, so much had happened in the interval. Now, as she looked at him, her distrust of him returned.

Yet his first words somewhat disarmed her, though the tone in which they were uttered was hardly what she would have expected. She saw he was labouring under some strong excitement.

"I have not seen you, Miss Thornton," he said, hoarsely, "for some time, and I had meant to write you a note of sympathy, but—but—I was so——"

"I understand," said Kitty, as Bennet paused, embarrassed.

"It was very sad for you," remarked Bennet.

"Yes," said Kitty, simply.

The three were now close to Ivydene, and Helen Eversleigh invited him to come in. Bennet stopped in the road, and did not at once reply; the others stopped, too, regarding him curiously.

Then, to the surprise of the girls, Bennet said, addressing Helen Eversleigh—

"Would you mind leaving us, Miss Eversleigh;

there is something I wish to say to Miss Thornton?" Then he turned to Kitty and observed, gruffly, "It is something very important, Miss Thornton, or I should not trouble you. Indeed, I have come on purpose to tell you of it."

Kitty bowed gravely, and Helen, greatly astonished, retired to the house, saying as she went—

"Come in when you have had your talk. You won't be long, I suppose."

But neither of the others answered.

"Is it something you have to tell me about my father?" asked Kitty, who at once supposed that Bennet had in some way or other obtained information respecting Morris Thornton.

"No, Miss Thornton," answered Bennet, bluntly. "It is about something quite different that I wish to speak to you."

"But if I do not wish to listen to you?" asked Kitty, suddenly alarmed.

"You must," insisted Bennet.

"Must!" cried Kitty. "You take a very strange tone. I shall not listen to you, Mr. Bennet."

And she moved a step from him.

He strode beside her, and put his hand roughly on her arm.

"I am in earnest," he said, his eyes gleaming balefully. "You must hear me unless you wish the worst to happen to those people in there."

He waved his hand toward Ivydene.

"Miss Thornton," Bennet went on, more calmly when he saw the girl gave heed to him, "it is in your power, and in yours alone, to save your friends, the Eversleighs, from the gravest disaster."

Kitty stared at him, thinking the man must have gone mad.

"I repeat," Bennet continued, "that it is in your power, Miss Thornton—do you understand?—in your power, to avert a great danger, a terrible disaster, from the Eversleighs."

"I do not understand you in the least," said Kitty. "Will you please explain yourself?"

"You will listen, then?" asked Bennet, tauntingly. "And you will do well to listen, if you have any regard for these people."

"Will you explain, please?" asked Kitty, impatiently.

"Yes; but I shall have to trouble you to hear rather a long story, but without it you would not understand."

"Go on," Kitty answered.

"I must commence by speaking of myself," said Bennet. "I had need of a sum of money—ten thousand pounds, and I directed my solicitors, Eversleigh, Silwood and Eversleigh, to get it for me by selling a property in Kensington called Beauclerk Mansions, which belonged to me—at least, I believed it belonged to me. I knew that the sale of the property was not likely to be effected immediately; it had to be advertised, and so on. But I did want that ten thousand in a hurry. So I wrote the Eversleighs, and, knowing the Mansions were worth far more than the sum I asked, requested them to make or procure me an advance of the money, and to repay the loan from the proceeds of the sale. Do you understand, Miss Thornton?"

"Perfectly; though I do not see why you should imagine it is interesting or important to me," replied Kitty.

"I am coming very quickly now to that," returned

Bennet. "I wrote the firm as I have told you, and received a communication in reply from Mr. Eversleigh, Mr. Francis Eversleigh, who said that he could not get me the money at once, but would do so in the course of a few days. But there were reasons for my having it without delay, so I went to see Mr. Eversleigh, and I saw him this morning."

Bennet paused, and looked meaningly at Kitty; he saw that she was following him closely.

"You saw Mr. Eversleigh, you were saying," she observed.

"I saw him, told him I must have the money, and he put me off, but said there would be as little delay as possible. With that I had to be content, though I was disappointed. I had nothing particular to do for the rest of the day, and it occurred to me to go to Beauclerk Mansions, and take a last look at them. I was in a bad humour, and the thing fell in with my mood. When I got to the Mansions, can you guess what I discovered?"

"How can I?" inquired Kitty, wonderingly.

"The discovery was an accidental one," Bennet resumed, "but there was no room for doubt about the matter. I found out that Beauclerk Mansions no longer belonged to me. They had been sold some twelve months before to a company named 'Modern Mansions, Limited.'"

And now Kitty began to see something of what Bennet was about to tell her, and she gazed at him apprehensively.

"The property had been sold!" she exclaimed.

"Yes; without my authority, and by my own solicitors, Eversleigh, Silwood and Eversleigh."

"Surely, there was some mistake," suggested the girl.

"I thought so myself, at first," responded Bennet, "and I promptly went to Mr. Eversleigh and asked for an explanation. But, Miss Thornton," he went on, impressively, "there was no mistake. Mr. Eversleigh put the blame of the sale on his dead partner, Silwood —that may be true, or it may not, in either case it is nothing to me—but he confessed that the property had been sold. No account was ever rendered to me—in a word, the sale was a fraudulent one. Out of his own mouth, Eversleigh stood convicted of fraud."

"I cannot believe it!" cried Kitty, "there must be some dreadful mistake."

"The law, Miss Thornton, will not call it a mistake. It will call it a crime. I have but to say the word, and Francis Eversleigh will be arrested, in due course, tried, and convicted."

Kitty stood and faced the man, her eyes full of indignation.

"Mr. Bennet," she said, "I have known Mr. Eversleigh for years, and I cannot credit what you say."

"It is quite natural for you to say so. I could hardly take the thing in myself at first, but there is not the slightest doubt of the truth of what I have told you. Francis Eversleigh is in my power, and I make no scruple in telling you so."

Bennet's air, Kitty acknowledged to herself, was not that of a man who spoke falsely, whatever else it was; she was afraid that he did in very deed speak the truth.

"You do not scruple to tell me this," she said; "why do you tell me about it at all?"

Bennet looked at the beautiful girl, and her beauty maddened him.

"It is because I love you," he said boldly.

"Because you love me! You take a strange way of showing your love. What do you mean?"

"I said that Eversleigh's fate was in my hands; I should have said it was in yours, Kitty."

"In mine?"

"Yes, in yours, in your pretty hands, Kitty. You have but to command me, and, so far as I am concerned, Eversleigh remains a free man. I will not seek to have him arrested if you tell me not to do so."

"And what more, Mr. Bennet? Is it that your love for me dictates this generosity? Oh, if that be so, I thank you with all my heart."

"I do not want your gratitude, Kitty. I want you. I will only stay my hand on condition that you promise to marry me. There, is that plain enough?"

"To marry you!" exclaimed Kitty. "You know very well that I am engaged to Gilbert Eversleigh."

"Oh, Gilbert!" said Bennet, contemptuously. "After what I have told you about his father you would never dream of marrying him!"

Kitty's eyes suddenly blazed.

"Take care what you say!" she cried.

The passion in her eyes did not daunt him; on the contrary, he admired her spirit, and his desire to marry her waxed stronger.

"Am I to understand, then," he asked deliberately, "that you prefer to see Gilbert Eversleigh disgraced, for disgraced he will be when his father is a convicted felon?"

Kitty started; she felt as if she were in a trap.

Bennet saw he had at last made an impression.

"You can ruin Gilbert, too, if you like," he

continued; "the fate of both father and son rests with you."

He thought he had said enough, and so was silent. The girl walking by his side was also silent. If what this man said was true, and she was afraid it was, what a frightful calamity had suddenly come upon her! Her heart sank within her, all the sweetness of life and love were on the instant turned to bitterness and gall.

"You can ruin Gilbert," Bennet had said; she could ruin the man she loved! And Francis Eversleigh, the kindly man, who had been a father to her! And Mrs. Eversleigh and the others! She could ruin them or save them—so Bennet had said. Her word would save them!

Bennet fancied he knew the debate which was going on within the girl's breast. At length Kitty came to a decision.

"Do you want an answer now?" she asked.

"At once; yes or no?"

"You know that I do not love you?"

"I love you, and you will come to love me."

"Never, never!" she cried wildly.

Bennet frowned heavily.

"You will, you shall, you must," he vowed.

"You cannot force love," said the girl.

"Now, Miss Kitty," said Bennet, roughly; "I do not wish to discuss that with you. Give me your answer! Will you marry me, yes or no? Or is Francis Eversleigh to go to prison?"

"If I marry you, how will that protect Mr. Eversleigh?"

"I will give him a receipt in full for whatever his

firm owes me. I will give you the receipt, if you like, and you can give it to him."

"Mr. Bennet," said Kitty, "I shall tell you what I am willing to do. You have told me some strange things; they are so strange that I find a difficulty in believing them. Yet I am afraid," went on the girl, honestly, "that they are true. But surely I have a right to ask that these statements of yours be confirmed. If you will give me till to-morrow—if you will come then, I will give you my answer."

"And pray what will you do in the mean time?"

"I shall speak to Mr. Eversleigh."

"Very well," said Bennet, after a moment's thought. "He will not deny the truth of what I have told you. I agree. I will be here at noon to-morrow for your decision. Only remember that the fate of the Eversleighs is in your hands, as I have said, and in yours alone."

And he turned and left her.

CHAPTER XXIII

On entering the house, Kitty went at once to her own room, though she knew Helen Eversleigh would think it strange, perhaps even unkind. "But she will never imagine why it is," thought the girl; "she will suppose Bennet had something painful to tell me about my father."

Kitty Thornton was a brave woman, and she had brains as well as courage; she sat down in her room, and deliberately set herself to consider the situation in which she now found herself. The conversation with Bennet had occupied but a short while, and she had hardly realized all it meant for her. Now, sitting there quietly, she went over it again. On the face of it, what he had told her about Eversleigh seemed improbable in the extreme, but she recalled the positiveness of his assertions and the air of truthfulness and certainty with which he had made them. It was clear to her that Bennet believed he did hold the fate of Eversleigh in his hands.

Then she thought of Francis Eversleigh. In her mind's eye she saw him as he had appeared to her in her girlhood—handsome, generous, large-hearted, kindness itself. Her instinct told her that he was not formed of the stuff out of which the thief and the swindler were made. And she recalled Bennet's words,

"Mr. Eversleigh put the blame of the sale on his dead partner Silwood"—Silwood, the man in whose chambers her father's body had been found; yes, Kitty had no doubt whatever that if any one was guilty, he was the criminal. She remembered Silwood's appearance very well, and she contrasted it with that of Eversleigh, to the great advantage of the latter. It was incredible that Eversleigh was a bad man. But though not actually guilty, was he a party to the guilt of Silwood all along, and therefore guilty in that sense? Or had he discovered what Silwood had done only after Silwood's death? Well, she must wait until she had heard what Francis Eversleigh had to say.

For, after all, these were minor points. In all likelihood, she concluded, Eversleigh would confirm Bennet's statements. If so, what then?

And, now, Kitty Thornton had need of all her courage.

The fate of the Eversleighs was in her hands; she could save them, but at what a price!

The sacrifice of her own happiness.

She could save them, but only by condemning herself to misery for the rest of her life.

As she sat thinking, thinking of the wretchedness that must be hers as the wife of Bennet, the poor girl closed her eyes, as if thus she could shut out that blank and dreary prospect. She had no illusions as to the nature of the man. In her heart she called him a bully and a brute, and she knew he was a desperate gambler. Her life with him could be nothing but one long horror.

"I cannot marry him," she said, rebelling against the harshness and bitterness of the dilemma thrust upon her.

"But what then?" she asked herself.

She knew Bennet would keep his word did she refuse to marry him; Francis Eversleigh would be arrested, and he and his family overwhelmed in one common ruin.

"How can I permit it?" she said.

Hitherto she had striven to keep the thought of her lover, Gilbert, out of her mind, so as to be able to reason more clearly, but in its background Gilbert had always been. She loved him with her whole heart, and it was seldom that, consciously or unconsciously, she was not thinking about him. She had looked forward with pride and joy to being his wife. And now?

Bennet had declared that Gilbert's father's ruin would be Gilbert's ruin too.

And she could save him.

"I must, I must," said Kitty, bravely, but her heart was cold as ice. "Cost me what it may, I must save him from ruin."

She told herself that it was her duty to make this sacrifice for her lover's sake, and she tried to steel herself to the idea. But when she thought of the long and bitter years that lay before her as the wife of Harry Bennet, her courage grew less and less.

"I must not think of *that*," she said; "if I do, I shall break down. I must think, and think only, of saving them from the ruin which threatens them all."

Still the tears would come into her eyes. She wiped them away, however, and when she went down to dinner showed no traces of them. Her eyes were suspiciously bright, and the spots of colour on her cheeks were less brilliant than usual, but her aspect was so little different from what it generally was that

even Helen Eversleigh, who looked at her inquiringly when they met, did not observe any change in her appearance.

Francis Eversleigh was at the head of the table, and from time to time he shot a quick glance at her. He had heard from his daughter, Helen, that Bennet had called that afternoon, and he felt sure Bennet had told the girl all. He expected she would speak to him on the subject after dinner, and he dreaded it. What would she say to him? What would she do? What had she said to Bennet?

Kitty had always been fond of Francis Eversleigh, and as she caught one or two of these glances of his, and knew the secret of his anxiety, she pitied him and smiled at him encouragingly. Like the other members of the Eversleigh household, she had noticed for weeks how poorly he had looked. Now, as she sat at table with him she told herself she knew why it was—he had been carrying in his breast the knowledge of his partner's crime. She felt so sorry for him, that for a time she almost forgot how black her own future was likely to be.

After dinner she and Eversleigh withdrew from the dining-room together, and went into the library. This move excited no surprise in the others, who supposed it accounted for by there being some fresh development with regard to her late father's affairs which required immediate attention.

Eversleigh left it to Kitty to begin the conversation.

"Mr. Bennet was here this afternoon," she said, steadily; "and he told me something which astonished and pained me more than I can express."

Kitty stopped, expecting Eversleigh to speak, but he only looked at her sorrowfully.

"He told me," said Kitty after a pause, "that some house property of his, which was entrusted to your firm, had been sold without his consent or knowledge, and that the money had been misappropriated. Is it true?"

"I regret to have to answer, Kitty, that it is too true," replied Eversleigh, falteringly. "It is only too true," he repeated, shaking his head sadly, "too true."

"Won't you tell me all about it?" asked the girl. "I do so wish to help you if I can," she cried earnestly.

"Kitty, you are, as you always have been, a dear sweet girl," responded Eversleigh, with twitching lips and tears standing in his eyes; "but I am afraid you can do nothing."

"Perhaps I can. But let me know, will you not, how this frightful thing has come about?" she urged.

"It is a dreadful story, a shameful story, Kitty. I have tried to act for the best——"

He broke off with a sob.

"I shall never believe you were guilty of anything criminal!" she exclaimed.

"I did not steal the money; you are right, if that is what you mean, dear; but the law will hold me guilty."

"I did not imagine for a single instant that you had taken any one's money wrongfully. Mr. Bennet said that you told him the money was taken by Mr. Silwood."

"Yes, yes," returned Eversleigh; "that is true."

"Besides yourself and Mr. Bennet and me, does any other person know about this—trouble?"

"No, not a soul."

"Then it is only Mr. Bennet you have to fear?"

"Yes; but is that not sufficient?"

"I am afraid it is. Still, if there was to be found a way of satisfying him, would that release you from further worries of the same kind?"

"Kitty," said Eversleigh, speaking with much emotion; "Kitty, I shall not pretend not to understand what you refer to when you talk of finding a way to satisfy Bennet. He told me what he intended doing—how he was to disclose to you that my fate was in his hands, and to declare to you he would not prosecute me if you would promise to marry him. It seems to me a monstrous proposition—that you should sacrifice yourself for me. No, Kitty, you must not marry him. You must leave us to our fate."

As Eversleigh said these words, there was a ring in his voice that had long been absent from it. He really meant what he said.

"I shall not leave you and the others to their fate," cried Kitty; "you are all dear to me—and then," she said shyly, "there is Gilbert. Mr. Bennet declares Gilbert will be involved in your ruin; that is," she added gently, "if you were found to be a party to—irregularities; then, in that case he would be compelled to give up the Bar."

Eversleigh nodded gloomily.

"I fear that would be so," he said with a gasp.

"Gilbert is dearer to me than myself," Kitty went on, blushing a little, "and I must save him if I can."

Neither spoke for a few minutes.

"You are a brave, heroic woman," said Eversleigh, at last. "But Gilbert will never consent to your sacrificing yourself in this way."

"Gilbert need not know until you are safe out of Bennet's grasp," suggested Kitty. "And do you not see that I am between two fires," she continued; "so that I must yield myself? If the worst befall you, then you, dear Mrs. Eversleigh who has been a mother to me, your sons and your daughter, will be made miserable for ever! Oh, I cannot think of it! And then there is my love for Gilbert! No," she sighed in a whisper; "I cannot ruin him."

"You are a noble girl," said Eversleigh, with deep feeling; "but I, we—even Gilbert—have no right to expect such a sacrifice from you, Kitty."

The girl did not at once reply. Instead she gazed thoughtfully at him.

"I wonder if there is no other way of satisfying Mr. Bennet?" she asked.

"I do not know of any."

"Could you not take the money you owe him out of my fortune? Oh, I would give him the half of all I possess—nay, the whole of it, if that would satisfy him."

"Kitty," said Eversleigh, in so despairing a voice, that it made her start in a sudden terror that he was about to do something desperate. "Kitty, I see I must tell you everything. Indeed, I should have told you everything sooner, but I am a weak, cowardly wretch. For nearly two months I have endured tortures every hour and every moment, ever since the day Silwood told me that he had embezzled—that is the bitter word—and appropriated to his own use for speculations on the Stock Exchange the money and property of our

clients—yours, Kitty, along with the rest. And I, fool that I was, never knew anything of it! I suspected nothing. It was the expected coming of your father which made Silwood speak out. Kitty, the part of your fortune which was in our charge has gone—it does not exist."

Kitty was silent.

"Why do you not reproach me?" inquired Eversleigh. "There is nothing you would say that I should not deserve."

And then he saw she was crying quietly. But it was not for the loss of the greater part of her fortune.

"How you must have suffered!" she said, through her tears.

And now the man broke down helplessly and wept like a child.

"I must save him," she said to herself with determination. "If there is no other way, then I must marry Mr. Bennet."

But even while she felt strong enough to carry out her purpose, there was a great cry of desolation in her heart; she tried to still it with the thought that there was something in the world even higher than love.

CHAPTER XXIV

After Kitty had left Francis Eversleigh she would have preferred to retire to the seclusion of her bedroom, but she knew that if she did so it would cause surprise to her friends and lead them to guess something was amiss. Anxious to spare them, she forced herself to join them in the drawing-room, and sat for an hour, taking her part in the general talk. Then, saying she was rather tired, she withdrew.

Between the making of a heroic resolve likely to cost the maker dear, and the carrying out heroically of all the resolve entails, there is, unless resolve and deed go swift together, room for many changes of feeling not unlike the rising and the falling of waves. Within Kitty's breast the waves rose and fell that night, now bearing her aloft so that the sacrifice of herself seemed easy, now burying her in depths which made it appear impossible.

She did not really waver in her determination; her mind was made up to save the Eversleighs from the calamity which threatened them. What troubled her most was the way in which she should communicate her decision to Gilbert. She knew that he loved her with all the strength and passion of a strong nature, and he knew that she loved him. And now she must tell him that she was not going to marry him, but

Bennet, the very man, in fact, against whom she had warned her lover, and whom, she was well aware, he detested. How was she to break the news to him? How tell him so that he would understand her decision was irrevocable?

For one thing, he must not know why she was breaking off their engagement. Francis Eversleigh had assured her that Gilbert was unconscious of Silwood's frauds; indeed, she had not required any such assurance. And she was determined that he should not know from her. She saw, then, that she could give him no explanation. She must just tell him bluntly she had changed her mind. But, in that case, what would he think of her? what must he think of her? And that she should choose Bennet of all men! Gilbert could not but misunderstand her. He must think her deceit itself.

It was this thought, more than any other, that sunk her deep in gulfs of despair.

And then she told herself that this, too—this renunciation of the good opinion of her lover, this misunderstanding she must subject herself to—was part of the price she had agreed to pay to save him and his father from ruin. "And Gilbert," she said in her heart, "will never know what I have done for him. He will deem me fickle, false, base, a cheat and a lie!"

And then a sort of rage came upon her, and she asked why this fate had been thrust upon her; what had she done to be made the victim of such outrageous fortune?

"Why should I suffer thus cruelly?" she cried rebelliously. "Is there no escape?"

She thought of what she had said to Francis Eversleigh—how she would gladly give up her wealth to Bennet if that would satisfy him. And now she remembered that the whole of her fortune was not lost, for there was still a considerable portion of it in Canada. Could she not make a bargain with Bennet? She resolved to try, but she did not believe she would succeed.

If she failed, and she felt she would, and was compelled to agree to marry Bennet, then it would be impossible to stay any longer with the Eversleighs; she must make arrangements for leaving them at once. They, too, would think her hateful and detestable. It was all very bitter!

"Yet they must never know," said Kitty, pondering darkly all these things through the long blank hours.

In the morning she saw Francis Eversleigh alone for a few moments.

"Kitty," he said, in a shaking voice, "you must not sacrifice yourself. It is not right. Tell Bennet to do his worst. We must bear it as best we can."

There was a brave smile in the girl's eyes as she answered him.

"I have decided," she responded. "You need have no fear. If there is no other way, I'll marry Mr. Bennet."

Then she stopped and looked at him earnestly.

"It may not be necessary," she remarked. "Perhaps the money and property I have in Canada will be enough to satisfy him."

"Kitty, Kitty," cried Eversleigh, "I do not know

what to say—do not know how to tell you, but I so love and admire you! But you must not blight all your sweet young life for me—it is not right. As it is, you suffer enough at my hands in the loss of the greater part of the fortune your father worked so hard for."

The girl took his hand and pressed it gently.

"I have made up my mind," she said gravely.

Eversleigh, unable to speak, raised her hand to his lips, and kissed it.

Punctually at twelve Bennet made his appearance at Ivydene. He found Kitty waiting for him in the shrubbery in front of the house.

"I have come for your answer," he said, without prelude. "Is it Yes or No, Miss Thornton," he asked excitedly.

"Will you listen to me first—just a moment," she pleaded, as she saw the impatient working of his face; "only a moment?"

"Well," Harry replied grudgingly; "what is it?"

"If you will tell me how much Mr. Eversleigh owes you, I will pay it to you—every farthing," replied Kitty.

Bennet shook his head with an almost savage gesture.

"Miss Thornton," said he, "you will not understand me. I have told you that I love you. And all's fair in love and war. I am glad to have this hold on you—glad to think that if it is even against your will I have such a chance of making you marry me, and I shall not relinquish it. Don't you see, Kitty, I should be a fool to give you up?"

"I will give you twice the amount Mr. Eversleigh owes you, if you like."

"It is useless, quite useless, to make any proposition of that kind," said Bennet, who, of course, thought that the girl's money would come to him in any case. "Will you marry me, yes or no?"

"But you know, Mr. Bennet, that I do not love you. You know that I am engaged to Gilbert Eversleigh?"

"Gilbert Eversleigh!" cried Bennet, with a fierce, scowling, threatening expression. "Why should I consider him? He took you from me; if it had not been for him, perhaps you would have loved me. I hate and loathe the very sound of his name. I should like to see him disgraced and ruined, but I am foregoing that gratification because I love you. I would rather marry you than wreak my vengeance on him, and to give up this opportunity of revenge is no slight thing for me to do."

"He has given you no cause for such feelings!"

"Cause enough," said Bennet. "But all this is stupid. For the last time, I tell you that the fate of the Eversleighs is in your power. Will you send Francis Eversleigh to prison, or will you marry me? That is the issue. And you must answer at once; I will be trifled with no longer."

Kitty, however, did not speak.

There was a sudden panic in the girl's heart. She was asking how could she bring herself to marry this man, with his coarseness and brutality.

"It is No, then!" exclaimed Bennet. "You doom your friends to hopeless ruin and infamy."

"Mr. Bennet, the answer is Yes," said Kitty, her voice quivering, but her heart once more steadfast.

"You will marry me?" asked Bennet, a note of joy in his rough tones.

"Yes, to save the Eversleighs."

"You will marry me soon?"

"Mr. Bennet, you must remember that my father has only been dead a few weeks."

"Kitty, now you have promised to marry me," said Bennet, and he spoke with an accent of sincerity, "I will remember anything you like to ask me to remember, for I do love you. But you will not keep me waiting too long?"

Having gained his object, Bennet tried to drop the bully and to become the lover.

"You do love me," said Kitty, scanning his face.

"With all my soul!"

"And yet your love is not strong enough to make you give me up—even when you know I do not love you, and that my love is another's?"

"Oh, I am not that sort of man; I am uncommonly human. When I see my chance I go for it with all my might; and here is my chance come by wonderful luck, and I take it. What an ass I should be not to take it! Do you blame me so much for doing so, when you, Kitty, are the prize to be won?"

Confident now that he had carried the day, Bennet spoke quite pleasantly. He even attempted to put his arm round the girl, but she would not let him.

"Mr. Bennet," she said, the colour burning in her cheeks, "I have promised to marry you, and I shall not break my word, but I do not love you. Pray spare me until—until——" And she stopped with a slight choke.

Bennet swore under his breath.

Aloud he said, "As you please, Kitty," and stood frowning at her heavily.

"My promise to you," Kitty reminded him, "is conditional on your giving Mr. Eversleigh a full discharge from all his indebtedness to you."

"Yes. You shall have the necessary document from me on the day of our marriage; that is fair, is it not?"

"Will you not let me have it now, or very soon?"

"I'm to give everything and get nothing?" asked Bennet. But even as he put this question he told himself there was no danger of the girl going back from her promise, and that he might safely let her have the discharge. Still, if he did so, it must be on terms. So he continued, "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you that discharge the first time you kiss me."

Kitty, though her heart felt like breaking all the while, smiled a wan assent.

"Is it a bargain?" he inquired.

And she nodded.

"You shall have the discharge," cried Bennet, "as soon as it can be prepared. Does that content you?"

"Yes," said Kitty, and there was a pause.

"My proposed marriage to you," said Kitty, speaking again, "will bring about some changes. It is quite plain that I can stay no longer at Ivydene with the Eversleighs—they will not understand why I am acting as I am doing, and, indeed, they must not suspect why it is. I shall have to invent some plea—some excuse. Until I have gone—for I must go—I do not wish them to know that I am to marry you. Francis Eversleigh

will know, but none of the rest need know until I have left Surbiton."

"Where do you think of going?" inquired Bennet. "You must not go far away."

"I have a distant relative—a second cousin of my father's—in Yorkshire. She is an elderly lady, and has more than once asked me to pay her a visit. It is to her that I shall go. Indeed, there is no other to whom I could go; she is the only relative that I have in the world."

"Yorkshire is a long way off," said Bennet.

"I can think of nothing else," she said.

"You will let me know what you decide," said Bennet, after an interval of silence.

"Yes. I'll write you. And now good-bye," said Kitty; "I feel tired and worn out."

When Bennet had gone, Kitty braced herself for the painful tasks which lay before her. First of all, she told Mrs. Eversleigh that she was going to Yorkshire next day, and though Mrs. Eversleigh said very little, the girl saw that she was hurt, offended, and greatly mystified. And Helen Eversleigh, Kitty could not but notice, thought her conduct strange. But neither of the Eversleigh ladies pressed her for an explanation, for which Kitty was thankful.

But infinitely the hardest thing was what she should say to Gilbert. She sat down in her room with a sheet of paper before her, but for a long while she could not bring herself to touch her pen. How she wished she could tell him something of the truth—tell him that she was not the false, fickle light o' love he must think her!

Again she had to fight the battle with herself, and again she triumphed.

It was a very short letter, but it was written in her heart's blood.

"Dear Gilbert," it ran, "I have changed my mind. Our engagement must be broken off. I intend marrying Mr. Bennet.—KITTY."

CHAPTER XXV

Ever since the discovery of Morris Thornton's body in Silwood's rooms, in Stone Buildings, Gilbert Eversleigh had constantly felt that he moved in an atmosphere of mystery, which affected him so closely that he could not but be very uncomfortable. He attempted in various ways to get further light, but without success. Another thing which worried him not a little was the poor health of his father, and the increasing disinclination the latter showed to attend to business. Over against these disquieting circumstances there were to be set Kitty's love for him, and his love for her, which far over-balanced them.

That morning Gilbert, when he awoke, first thought of Kitty, and promised himself that, as he and she had arranged, they would have a long splendid time together that very day.

When he went in to breakfast, a small pile of letters lay on the table beside his plate. He took them up and scanned the writing of the addresses. Of course, he at once recognized Kitty's writing. For a moment he held her letter in his hand, a happy smile on his face, and was about to open it, but he put it down again, saying to himself that he would keep it to the last as a special treat. So he went through the rest of his correspondence, and read it rather slowly, to put off

the moment of delight which should be his when he came to the girl's letter.

At last he opened her letter.

"Dear Gilbert," he read. Instantly he was alarmed, for this was not the way she generally began her letters to him. "I have changed my mind," ran the words; his alarm increased. But when he next came to the words, "Our engagement must be broken off. I intend marrying Mr. Bennet," a feeling of stupefaction overcame him. He read the short letter over and over again in a mechanical sort of way, hardly taking in its meaning.

"'I have changed my mind,'" he repeated to himself. "'Our engagement must be broken off. I intend marrying Mr. Bennet.'"

The thing was so sudden that at first it stunned him—he could not believe it.

But there it was in black and white, in Kitty's own writing.

"I have changed my mind!"

There was no mistaking that.

"Our engagement must be broken off. I intend marrying Mr. Bennet," she wrote.

These were her words, and there was no getting away from them.

So everything was at an end between them!

More than that, Kitty was to marry Bennet!

With a sudden movement of anguish and rage, Gilbert crumpled the letter in his hand and threw it from him. He sat for a while staring out of his window, while his mind began to work with incredible swiftness.

Kitty had jilted him—for Bennet!

But Gilbert knew the girl very well, and the first movements of grief, anger, pain, and amazement past, he tried to think the matter out calmly, with the result that he passionately told himself Kitty was no jilt, and there must be something astounding behind her letter. Then he picked up the crumpled sheet of paper from the floor, smoothed it out, and read its contents once more. But there was neither light nor comfort to be got from them.

What could be the explanation of her extraordinary conduct? he wondered, for of course there must be some explanation. Kitty was no shallow flirt, no woman of mere caprice. Why had she done this?

But did her letter afford no hint?

She had not only thrown him over, but she announced she was to marry Bennet—Bennet, of all people in the world! Had she not warned him against this very man? And now she was to marry him!

Why?

As Gilbert sat in his room endeavouring to solve this problem, it seemed to him that he heard Kitty's rich voice saying in low and sincere accents the words —almost the last she had uttered when they were together by the river-side three evenings before, "I feel as if I could not exist without you now, Gilbert."

What could have brought about this mighty change? What sinister, malign influence had cast its spell over her?

As he thought and thought, it appeared to him plain enough that the girl's change of mind must associate itself in some way with Bennet.

"Yet," said he to himself, "I know she loves me even as I love her. She does not love Bennet, whom

she declares she now intends to marry. What pressure, in Heaven's name, can Bennet have brought to bear on her? Pressure there must have been, and of the strongest kind, otherwise she would never dream of marrying him. What can it be?"

A little longer he sat asking questions to which he could furnish no answers.

"I shall go to Surbiton," he said at last, "and ask her what she means. She has not forbidden me to see her, and I shall go at once."

But when he reached Ivydene, Kitty was not to be seen; she had left Surbiton by an early train that morning.

He found the house in some confusion, and in answer to his inquiries, he could discover no more than that Miss Thornton had departed for Yorkshire. He saw both his mother and his sister, but could glean very little from them. Both, he noticed, were greatly excited and distressed, but they told him that, beyond saying it was necessary for her to leave, Kitty had offered no explanation.

"I cannot understand it at all," said Mrs. Eversleigh. "Have you no idea of what has occurred to cause her to act in this strange manner, Gilbert?" she asked her son.

"I have not the slightest idea," replied Gilbert. "I got a short note this morning from her. It said nothing about leaving you. She said she had changed her mind with regard to our engagement, and that she was going to marry Mr. Bennet."

"Marry Mr. Bennet?" exclaimed Mrs. Everleigh, her eyes wide with astonishment. "She did not tell me that. Oh, Gilbert, what does it all mean? My

heart misgives me, there is something frightfully wrong! She told us last night, without any warning, that she was leaving us. Of course I did not like to question her—I had no right, and her manner was forbidding. But the poor girl looked very sad and unhappy. I spoke to your father about her, but he was too ill and miserable to discuss the subject, or, indeed, any subject. I did not wish him to go to town to-day; but he said it was most important he should go, and he went."

"Did he appear surprised at Miss Thornton's decision?"

"I cannot say he did. When she told him she was going, he only nodded."

"Do you think he knows why she has gone, and why she is going to marry Mr. Bennet?"

"I asked him these very questions, Gilbert; but he said he could not tell me anything. It is all very strange!"

"Very strange!" cried Gilbert. "It is perfectly maddening!"

"Perhaps you had better see your father," suggested Mrs. Eversleigh.

"Yes; I'll go to him at once," said Gilbert.

"You will be gentle and careful, Gilbert!" urged his mother. "More than once lately I have been forced to think the troubles through which your father has recently passed have been almost too much for him. He is all the time in a state of fever both of body and mind. You will not forget that, my son!"

"Certainly not, mother," replied Gilbert.

Eversleigh had expected Gilbert would come to

him, but, up to the moment of seeing him, was uncertain how to act.

Gilbert, when he met his father, began by stating he had received an extraordinary letter from Miss Thornton, in which she broke off her engagment with him, and announced her intention of marrying Bennet.

"As soon as I got the letter," Gilbert continued, "I went over to Surbiton to see her, but when I went there I found she had left the house and gone to a friend in Yorkshire. Mother could tell me nothing, so I have come to you to see if you can help me to some understanding of the matter."

"Did Kitty give you no reason?"

"She merely said she had changed her mind."

"Changed her mind! A woman's reason," said Eversleigh, with a dreary smile.

"Kitty was not that kind of woman," declared Gilbert. "There must have been some powerful reason to make her act in this way."

The young man, his face working, strode up and down the room.

Presently he turned to his father and asked, almost fiercely—

"Can you tell me why this has happened? Do you know why she has broken off with me, and why she is to marry Bennet?"

Eversleigh moved uneasily in his chair, looked at his son with a glance of entreaty, but remained silent.

"Father," said Gilbert, "you do know something! Will you not tell me of it? Have I not a right to know? I appeal to you to tell me everything."

Eversleigh glanced this way and that, like a man seeking some path of escape.

"Father," said Gilbert again; "you must tell me! I love Kitty with my whole soul—she is dearer to me than life, and I cannot resign her without a struggle! I must know what has come between her and me. Can you not help me?"

"Why don't you write Miss Thornton?" asked Eversleigh.

"I shall do so, though the tone of her letter is not encouraging. But do you mean to say you do not know what has made her change her mind?"

Eversleigh tried to speak. A frightful struggle was going on within him. Should he tell Gilbert the whole truth or not? Suddenly he made up his mind, as Gilbert said beseechingly—

"Oh father, will you not tell me what you know?"

"Yes, I'll tell you what I know—all that I know. But how am I to tell it? You will not forget, Gilbert, that I am your father, your most unhappy father, and you must not condemn me utterly."

Condemn!

The word had an ominous sound, and Gilbert felt himself grow cold as he heard his father's words.

"What is it?" he asked, in a hoarse voice.

"Can you cast your thoughts back," said Eversleigh, in a weak and quavering tone, "to a certain Saturday in July, when you were in this office? I had spoken to you of the presence of Mr. Bennet at Ivydene——"

"Remember that day!" broke in Gilbert. "Shall I ever forget it? It was on the evening of that day I proposed to Kitty, and she accepted me. I have more cause than ever now to remember it!"

"That was the day, Gilbert. It was also the day, you will remember, on which we heard that Mr.

Thornton was coming back to England. The whole trouble begins with his letter," said Eversleigh, and stopped with a gulp and a choke.

"With Mr. Thornton's letter?"

"Yes," said Eversleigh, trying to fight down his emotion. "Gilbert," he went on more calmly, "I am very sorry to tell you that on the day we received the letter intimating Mr. Thornton's return, I received from Mr. Silwood a confession that he had been speculating with the funds and the property of our clients, and that all had been lost—Mr. Thornton's with the rest."

"What!" cried Gilbert, doubting his senses.

"It is true."

"Father, do you know what you are saying?"

"Alas, yes, only too well! Thornton's letter spoke of making a formal examination of the securities we held of his, and it was this which led Silwood to confess his embezzlements."

"But you had nothing to do with them, father!"

"No; but I need not tell you that in the eye of the law, I, as Silwood's partner, was equally guilty. What I have suffered, what I have endured from that moment, you can never guess; I have lived in a hell of torture. When I knew the truth, I did not know what to do; but I just let myself drift and drift and drift, hoping against hope that somehow or other there might be a way out of the difficulties that beset me. But there has been no way out. Things have gone from bad to worse. There was first Silwood's death, and then the death of Morris Thornton."

Gilbert uttered a sharp cry.

"You thought Silwood murdered Thornton because of the money?" he said.

"Before the inquest I did, but not afterwards. I know no more about that mystery than you. Well, the effect of these two deaths was to give me a respite —I knew it could be at best but a short one, for at any moment some other client might make a demand which, owing to Silwood's defalcations, we should not be able to meet. And, by a devilish chance of fate, Bennet was the man to make that demand. He told us to sell a block of flats belonging to him, and asked us to advance him ten thousand pounds pending the sale."

"And you couldn't!" exclaimed Gilbert, whose head was whirling with what he had heard.

"There was no possibility of getting the money. But that was not the way in which Bennet came to know of our—embarrassments. He took it into his head to go and see the flats—out of a sort of bravado, I think, and there he discovered the flats had been sold a year ago. He came to me, and I was compelled to tell him the flats had been sold without my knowledge by Silwood. You see that placed me in his power; he could have denounced me at once, and I expected nothing else. But he did not act at once; instead, he said he would take a night to think over it. Next day he returned and announced he would not prosecute me, provided I brought about the breaking off the match between you and Kitty, and got Kitty to marry him."

Eversleigh, who had spoken rapidly, now paused; while Gilbert, with swimming eyes, gazed at his father.

"I protested to Bennet," Eversleigh resumed, "that it was impossible for me to do this; my influence was not strong enough. And then he said he would tell Kitty

everything, and leave my fate to her. He did tell her everything, and Kitty, to save me from prison, and you and the rest from ignominy, consented to marry him."

Gilbert drew a deep breath.

"So that is how it is?" he said, his voice full of pain. "She has sacrificed herself for us!"

"It is very noble of her," said Eversleigh.

"Noble, yes; it is heroic. But we have no right to expect such a sacrifice from her."

"None whatever. Indeed, I told her so. I urged her to leave us to our fate; but she would not."

Eversleigh looked at his son anxiously.

The young man's face had a strange hopeless expression; but he had taken his father's statement much more quietly than the latter had anticipated. Gilbert made no frantic moan, the calamity of which he had just been apprised went far beyond anything of the kind. It now literally struck him dumb, both with surprise and grief. Kitty gone from him for ever! Kitty, his darling, his wife that was to be! And she had gone in order to save him and his father; and his father was a defaulter!

"I must think over what you have told me, sir," he said at length, and went across to his chambers in the Temple.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Gilbert Eversleigh walked out of his father's office, and finding an unoccupied bench in the neighbouring Lincoln's Inn Fields, sat down to ponder this terrible and altogether unexpected situation.

First, he tried to grasp the facts which had just been thrust upon him, and to see them in all their bearings.

There was no question now but he must relinquish all thoughts of Kitty Thornton. The sacrifice the girl was making for him and his father filled him with a feeling of worship of her into which there entered something sacred. In his mind he placed her on an altar, as it were, and could have fallen down before her in adoring homage of that lofty spirit of loyalty she had shown. Now that he knew all, he determined to write to thank her for what she had done. So far as he was concerned, it must be his part, he told himself, to make her sacrifice no harder. Therefore he must abide by her decision and accept it.

Gilbert was a young man, with all the high hopes and the hot passions of youth, and it was not without the deepest pain that he thought of her and his vanished happiness. It was natural that he should first think of her and of his own loss. But once he accepted her decision, he resolved to lock away her image in his

heart, and to cherish it there in secret. Having got himself into this frame of mind, he passed on to consider his father's position.

The greatness and importance of the firm of Eversleigh, Silwood and Eversleigh, solicitors, had never for a single instant been doubted by Gilbert, until his father's declaration had swept away that greatness and importance for ever. All his life Gilbert had believed his father's firm was as enduringly established as the Bank of England; he regarded it as a permanent institution. It was difficult for him to realize it was nothing now but a bankrupt concern. When he did realize it, and remembered the obligations of the firm which must exist over and above those arising out of the Thornton and Bennet Estates, he saw with fatal clearness Kitty's sacrifice might very well be made in vain, and that some other client might, and almost certainly would, bring about the exposure and ruin of the firm she had tried to save.

Then, he asked himself, what was his own duty? Without doubt, he must stand by his father, and do what he could to help him. But how?

The cause of all this disaster and calamity was Silwood, the man whom he had instinctively disliked and distrusted. It was Silwood who had ruined the firm. It was through Silwood, indirectly, that he had lost Kitty. And Silwood was dead! From his grave he defied them all to touch him; there was nothing to be done to a dead man, Gilbert reflected, drearily.

But was that altogether true? The lips of the dead man were for ever sealed; but had he left nothing behind him? The Eversleigh firm had been a great one, and to make away with all its funds and properties

could have been no small business, but one which involved a large number of transactions. Surely there must be notes, traces, indications of these transactions somewhere. Thousands and thousands of pounds from sales of shares, and house or land property could not be got or disposed of without leaving some mark.

So Gilbert reasoned.

And he resolved to urge his father, therefore, to have everything connected with Silwood's department thoroughly investigated at once. And then he thought of his father. "Cast your mind back to that Saturday," his father had said. Measured by what his father must have suffered, that Saturday seemed ages ago. Poor unhappy father! A great wave of pity for him flooded the heart of the son, who now reproached himself bitterly for having spoken no word of sympathy.

"I must go to him," he said, rising from the bench, "and ask him to let me help him."

A few moments later Gilbert stood once more in his father's room, his face no longer dark, but full of purpose.

"When you told me what you did just now, father," said he, "I am afraid I did not behave very well. I was so taken up with myself that I had no consideration for you. It was wrong of me. I should have known you must have passed through a dreadful time, in which you have suffered agonies. And now, sir, I come to request you to permit me to assist you in every way I can."

"Gladly, my boy; but how can you? What is there that any one can do? I am like a sinking ship," said Eversleigh, mournfully.

"Will you tell me if you have overhauled Mr. Silwood's books and papers?"

"No, I have not. I began, but desisted."

"Why, father?"

"Because I thought Williamson was suspicious. I felt sure that he was watching me. So I stopped, and allowed things to drift."

"But, father, the only chance you have lies in making this investigation. If Williamson is in the way, he must be got rid of."

"Would not that in itself excite remark?"

"Not necessarily, surely. But if his going does cause remark, we shall just have to put up with it. Besides, we can give him an excellent character and a gratuity—these will salve his feelings."

"But what excuse can I make?"

"Can you not say you are going to make extensive changes, owing to Mr. Silwood's death?"

"He has been such a long time with us," objected Eversleigh.

"Yes, I know; but you cannot afford to keep a man who suspects you. At any cost, he must go."

"He is a good clerk," began Eversleigh.

"I wonder if he really is!" exclaimed Gilbert. "If he was such a good clerk, how was it that he did not know of Silwood's defalcations?"

"Perhaps he does know."

"If he does, it would be well to be sure of it. Have him in now, and tell him he is to go. If he knows anything he will speak out."

"You are so impetuous," said Eversleigh, feebly.

"I have a strong feeling," replied Gilbert, "that your safety lies in immediate action."

"And what would be your next step?"

"I should get in an accountant familiar with legal work, and have him go over all Silwood's books and papers. Silwood cannot have disposed of all the moneys and properties of the firm without leaving some indication of how he did it; and perhaps an investigation may reveal that things are not so bad as you think. He cannot have disposed of everything. For instance, there must be certain trusts and other matters with which he could not tamper. Suppose we try to look into them all, father."

A spark of hope shone for a moment in Eversleigh's eyes, but it speedily went out.

"I am quite willing, Gilbert, but I am afraid it will not be any use," he said, dejectedly. "Whom would you think of getting to examine the books and papers?"

"I fancy I know the very man. Young Archer Martin, of Roscoe and Martin."

"Could you depend on his discretion?"

"Absolutely."

Eversleigh was silent. His impulse was to surrender himself to the guidance of his son; but he was sore afraid. Gilbert saw from his father's face that he was hesitating.

"There is no other way, father," he cried, with decision.

"Then be it so," agreed Eversleigh.

"And what about Williamson?"

"Can you not let him remain, at least, for a time?"

"I think not, sir."

"Well, well. I am not sure it is wise."

But Gilbert had no doubts, and in the end Williamson received a note saying that after that week his services would not be required. At the same time, the head-clerk was given a handsome cheque as a solatium.

Gilbert next set out for the office of Roscoe and Martin, where he was fortunate to find Archer Martin. As briefly as possible, Gilbert told him that he had reason to believe there had been some irregularities in his father's office, and that his father had deputed him to invite the accountant to make a searching investigation immediately, if that fitted in with his engagements.

"As it happens, it does; I can set to work to-morrow," said Martin.

"Of course," said Gilbert, "it is a confidential investigation—that is understood."

"Certainly," said the accountant, who had no idea that he might innocently be making himself a party to a fraud.

Archer Martin, accordingly, went to 176, New Square, the following day, and began his inquiries. Without referring to any one except Gilbert, he went on his way, steadily plodding through the books and papers of the firm. His labours extended over several days, but he had not gone very far when he saw the true character of the work he was engaged on. He knew there was being disclosed bit by bit a gigantic system of fraud which involved huge sums of money, and that the system had been practised remorselessly and with diabolical cunning and ingenuity for years. He saw that Cooper Silwood, by one means or another, had appropriated many thousands of pounds, though what he had done with the cash did not appear. It

was plain he had stopped at nothing; there were false entries everywhere and many forgeries.

He wondered at the ability Silwood had manifested in keeping up appearances so long. It was evident to him, from various sums of interest being paid to clients at the proper time, as if their investments still remained, that Silwood had kept a strict account of his robberies, but though he searched in Silwood's room, throughout the rest of the office, and even in Silwood's apartments in Stone Buildings, for some book or memoranda relating to these robberies, he could not find it. He came to the conclusion that Silwood had either destroyed it or taken it with him. He had heard of Silwood's death as well as of the death of Morris Thornton, and now saw pretty clearly how matters stood.

Failing to light upon Silwood's memoranda, he tried to see what could be done by tracking out some of the larger transactions of the defaulting solicitor, which necessarily involved the names of other persons.

And this led him to make an extraordinary discovery, though he did not think it so extraordinary as it really was.

Amongst the names of persons having large transactions with Silwood, there occurred that of James Russell, described as of 99, Douglas Street, Stepney. In the aggregate, Silwood's dealings with this man came to a vast sum, and Archer Martin thought Douglas Street, Stepney, was a curious address for one who presumably must be very well off indeed.

All through his investigation he had been in close contact with Gilbert Eversleigh, and he now suggested some inquiries be made about Mr. James Russell, of 99, Douglas Street, Stepney. This Gilbert undertook to do himself.

Gilbert had some difficulty in finding Douglas Street, but eventually did find it. No 99 turned out to be a humble house—not at all the kind of dwelling in which a man dealing with large sums of money was likely to reside. He discovered also that it was no longer occupied by Russell, that individual with his wife and crippled child having left it some time before; but he learned that they were poor people, living in a very poor way. And much more he could not learn.

"What, then, was the connection between Cooper Silwood and James Russell?" he asked himself. "Was Russell a confederate?"

But he could get no further than this supposition. He had to content himself with putting a private detective on the trail of James Russell, and awaiting results.

CHAPTER XXVII

It was now the second week of September. Kitty Thornton was staying at Buckhurst House, near Selby, in Yorkshire, not many miles from Doncaster, with her relative, Mrs. Joicey, a widow lady.

The girl, though she felt as if her heart was broken and there never could be any happiness in the world for her again, still adhered firmly to her determination to do what she considered her duty. Since she had come to Yorkshire she had heard but once from the Eversleighs. The message came in a short note from Gilbert, which ran—

"My father has told me all. God bless you and keep you."

The words were brief, but Kitty read into them a depth of meaning. She pictured to herself Gilbert writing this letter in much the same spirit of renunciation of joy and acceptance of inevitable evil, as had inspired her own action. And again she told herself, as she had had to tell herself very often, that in life there were higher things than love. But she treasured up Gilbert's words and even the piece of paper on which they were written.

Meanwhile she had another interview with Bennet, who, following the round of the races, as usual, had

gone down to Yorkshire for the great Doncaster September meeting, in which his horse, Go Nap, was expected to cut no small figure.

Although Bennet had not been able to get the ten thousand pounds from Francis Eversleigh which he had asked him for, he yet had experienced very little difficulty in obtaining all the funds he wanted for his purposes. More than once before this time he had had recourse to a certain Jew, Joel Levy by name, for loans, which Bennet had always heretofore repaid punctiliously; he was therefore in excellent credit with this money-lender.

When Bennet told Levy he was engaged to marry Kitty Thornton, the daughter of Thornton, the Missing Millionaire, whose remarkable story was known to everybody, Levy offered no objection when he was asked for a fresh loan. He merely inquired when the marriage was to take place, and was satisfied on hearing it was arranged for an early date—as soon, in fact, as the lady's mourning for her father would decently permit.

Levy congratulated Bennet on his good fortune, wished him equal luck in his racing, and, having obtained his signature to bills carrying interest at fifty per cent., wrote out a cheque.

Thereafter Bennet liquidated his most pressing liabilities, and with the balance, still a considerable sum, set off in high spirits for Yorkshire.

But before going north he had seen Francis Eversleigh, been told the exact sum for which Beauclerk Mansions had been sold by Silwood, and had had prepared a discharge to the firm for the same. This he took with him unsigned, and when he presented

himself at Buckhurst House, and asked for Miss Thornton, he had the document in his pocket.

He had made a bargain with the girl for it, and his pulses beat fiercely as he thought he would at last hold her in his arms and embrace her. He knew well enough that her response was likely to be of the coldest, but assured himself that from the moment he touched her lips, he should begin to dominate and bend her to his will.

Kitty received him much more graciously than he expected, but this was merely because she felt that, with a man of Bennet's character and disposition, the Eversleighs would not be safe until her sacrifice was complete. She was afraid, too, that in some way she might be tricked by him.

When he handed her the document which was to cancel the obligations of Eversleigh's firm, he was careful to tell her it had been drawn up by Francis Eversleigh himself, who had also sent with it a covering letter, expressing its effect in formal terms.

"I think," said he to her, "I have done exactly what you would have wished me to do. Nothing remains now except for me to sign it and transfer it to you."

Kitty nodded gravely, and brought him pen and ink, that he might affix his signature to the discharge.

He signed his name with a flourish.

"I would do a great deal more than this for you, Kitty," he cried, as, holding the paper in his hand, he advanced towards her.

Giving it to her, he said, eagerly, "You remember the bargain we made?"

"Yes," she replied, and unresistingly allowed him

to take her in his arms. He clutched her to his breast in an almost savage embrace, while he showered kisses on her lips. Passively she submitted to his caresses, though she loathed them and him from the bottom of her soul. By a strong effort of will, she managed to control herself so as not to show the repulsion with which he filled her.

"And I have promised to marry this man!" she thought. "How shall I ever be able to live with him!"

As she gently disengaged herself from him, he saw that she was deathly white.

"Oh, Kitty!" he exclaimed. "If you would only love me!"

"Love was not in our compact," she said, with a tremor.

"You shall love me," he responded. "When we are married, you must love me."

But the girl said nothing.

Then he asked if she would not accompany him to the races. "You are sure to bring me luck," he cried.

Reminding him that she was still in the deepest of mourning, she declined, wondering how the man should be so unfeeling.

"For the moment I had forgotten," he returned, apologetically. "It was very thoughtless of me—pray forgive me; but wish me luck all the same, will you not, Kitty?"

Kitty, however, was hurt, and would give him no answer. Bennet regarded her for an instant or two, a heavy frown gathering on his face.

"You refuse to wish me luck!" he cried. "I do everything you ask me to do, and yet you won't wish

me good luck! For your sake I have forgone my claim on the Eversleighs, and you haven't one good word for me! Kitty, I warn you not to cross me, not to make me angry. Thanks to you, the Eversleighs owe me no money—that is true, but remember that if I were to whisper in certain quarters what I know about the firm, its credit would not last very long."

"What! You would do such a thing!"

"It depends on you, Kitty, and on you alone. Be my friend—I know you cannot, perhaps, love me all at once, but be my friend; in our circumstances surely this is not much to ask from you."

"What would you have me do?"

"Wish me luck, Kitty—that's a very little thing!"

"I have always heard, Mr. Bennet," the girl said, looking at him steadily, "that this racing is your ruin."

"Oh, you preach, do you!" ejaculated Bennet, with a scowl, and, without another word, turned on his heel and left her, while Kitty bitterly asked herself if her sacrifice was to go for nothing.

An hour or two later, Bennet was at Doncaster, in close confabulation with Bob Deans, the jockey who was to ride Go Nap.

"You understand thoroughly?" inquired Bennet, as he was going back to his hotel.

"Yes, guv'nor, I understand perfectly," replied the jockey. "You can depend on me."

But Bob Deans made a face behind the other's back.

"He's a daisy," he said to himself, "that's what he is!"

The first day of the Doncaster September meeting passed by without special incident. Bennet had several

bets on the different events, but at the end his book nearly balanced; it was a trifle against him.

"It will be all right to-morrow," he said to an acquaintance, with whom he was discussing the fortunes of the day. "I expect that Go Nap will pull me through handsomely."

"You believe he'll win?"

"I feel absolutely confident of it," said Bennet, with emphasis.

"You are not alone in that," remarked the other. "I noticed your horse is going up in the betting; it now stands at five to one against; a few days ago it was ten to one."

Bennet smiled; indeed, his face showed every sign of pleasure.

"You might do worse," said he, "than put a bit on him."

"Yes, I think I shall," responded the other; "it looks pretty good."

And to all whom he met Bennet spoke well of his horse, and took any small bets that were offered, but, contrary to his usual practice, he would not risk any large sum. And all the while, secretly, through agents he thought he could trust, he was laying heavily against Go Nap, until he stood to win £20,000 if the horse *lost.*

Bright sunshine, a cool breeze, and a perfect track combined to make the second day of the races peculiarly enjoyable to the devotees of the turf. The race in which Bennet's horse was to run was the third on the list. The fine appearance of the animal that morning as he went for a short gallop had gained for him many supporters, and an immense amount of

money was forthcoming on him, with the result that he further improved his position in the betting. When the flag fell, the price was only three to two against him.

To the huge delight of his backers, Go Nap won easily. Taking the lead from the start, he was never seriously challenged, and reached the post "with plenty to spare."

Bennet, who was watching the race from one of the stands, had followed his horse from start to finish with anxious eyes. He had given Bob Deans certain instructions, and he believed they would be obeyed implicitly by the jockey. Bennet saw the horse leading at the beginning. That was nothing, he said to himself, as Deans knew what to do, and was the best judge of when to do it. But as Go Nap sailed along steadily in front, apparently without effort, Bennet commenced to see the race as through a mist. When his horse won, and his friends were offering him their congratulations, he could scarcely speak for rage. His passion completely blinded him to the impolicy of his behaviour, and everything that was worst in the man came to the surface. Hardly noticing what was said to him, he rushed from the stand.

"He takes it queerly," said a bystander.

"His head's a bit turned, though that's perhaps not to be wondered at," said a second.

As for Bennet, he literally saw red.

"Deans has sold me!" was the savage cry in his heart.

Thrusting those aside who happened to be in his path, he made his way to the jockey, who saw him coming. Bob Deans viewed with alarm the fury and

despair in Bennet's face, and turned to run away, but with two or three quick bounds Bennet was upon him.

Grasping the jockey by the shoulder, Bennet, who had utterly lost control of himself, and was wholly blind to consequences, shook him as a terrier shakes a rat. Bennet was a tall, athletic man, and the tiny figure of Bob Deans was as nothing to him.

Instantly several of those standing about tried to interfere and separate the two men.

But Bennet, who was now to all intents and purposes a madman, shook them off fiercely, without letting go his hold on Deans.

"Leave me alone," the jockey spluttered, "or I'll give you away! Let me go!"

"Let you go, you hound!" cried Bennet in a terrible voice, and, his face hideously distorted, he shouted, "By ——, I'll kill you!"

The onlookers again strove to pull the two men apart, and succeeded sufficiently for Bob Deans to cry so that every one heard him—

"He wished me to pull the horse; he offered me a big bribe, but I would do nothing crooked."

Bennet heard the words as well as the others.

Putting forth all his strength, and quite beside himself, he sprang forward with uplifted fist, and catching the unfortunate jockey a frightful blow under the chin, felled him to the ground.

Many now ran up to the group. Bob Deans was a popular jockey, and the victory of Go Nap had been popular. Soon there was a great crowd.

A short examination showed that Bob Deans was dead.

CHAPTER XXVIII

The little jockey had ridden his last race!

The blow which had struck him down had been delivered by one who had been a first-class athlete, and who was still in splendid physical condition. There had been the stark madness, too, of blind rage behind Bennet's arm, and the blow had proved fatal.

When the truth was known, there instantly was a great commotion. Bennet made no effort to get away; if he had attempted to fly he would not have succeeded, for he was ringed round by hostile and stern faces that plainly spoke of vengeance. In a moment more hands were laid upon him by those of the crowd nearest him, but he offered no resistance. Instead, he stood staring at the motionless body of his victim, and appeared not to realize what he had done, and the position in which his act had placed him.

Suddenly from somewhere in the crowd a loud cry went up of "Murder! Murder!"

The cry seemed to break the fit of stupor in which Bennet was, for his face was seen to quiver, while a shudder shook his frame.

"What have I done? What have I done?" he said, as if he had just become conscious of the deed he had committed.

"You have killed him," replied one of those standing by.

"He is not dead?" asked Bennet, wildly.

"Dead! yes; he is dead, and you killed him!" answered the same man.

"I never meant to kill him," said Bennet, looking once more at the little figure that lay on the ground.

"Why," said a voice, "I heard you say to him, 'I'll kill you!'—I heard you say those very words!"

"I was in a passion," Bennet declared, "and did not know what I was doing. I never thought of killing him."

"Then why did you say to him—I heard the words distinctly—'I'll kill you'?"

But Bennet made no reply. He now comprehended fully the position in which he stood, and he thought silence his best policy. Those about him, however, were far from silent. He could not help hearing what was being said, and he understood that nothing but detestation and execration were being expressed. The crowd had no sympathy whatever for him. On the contrary, had the crowd not been composed of Englishmen, accustomed to abide by the law of the land, Bennet would have been given a short shrift. If what he had done had been perpetrated in America, he would undoubtedly have been immediately lynched out of hand. But the crowd waited for the police to come upon the scene.

The crowd, however, talked excitedly, vehemently. The words which had passed between Bennet and the jockey were repeated from lip to lip. The statement of Bob Deans that Bennet had tried to bribe him to

pull Go Nap, and that he had refused to do so, was soon known to all; in the minds of most was the thought that Bennet, in suggesting this course to the jockey, was guilty of a crime even greater perhaps than murder, and that no punishment was too heavy for it. Many of them would have maintained that hanging was too good for him; some of them even said so.

Presently the police came up, and Bennet was arrested and charged with the murder of Bob Deans.

The affair, as was to be expected, made a tremendous sensation, not only throughout the world of the turf, but everywhere.

At Doncaster itself reports of what had taken place spread like wildfire through the place; nothing else was talked of, and but little interest was taken in the remaining races on the programme that afternoon.

In the whole history of racing never had there been anything so extraordinary.

The popular victory of Go Nap, the murder of the victorious jockey by the owner of the horse, the revelation which had been given by the unfortunate Deans of the reason why Bennet had killed him,—these and other particulars, which grew and grew as they passed from mouth to mouth, formed as sensational a set of incidents as could well be imagined. Brief but lurid accounts of what had occurred at Doncaster appeared in the London evening papers the same day, and caused the greatest excitement.

Gilbert Eversleigh, walking about seven o'clock from the Temple to his club for dinner, his mind occupied and distressed by the difficult problem of how his father was to escape ruin, received his first

intimation of the tragedy from the placard of one of these journals. In large, solid black letters he read—

"Victory of Go Nap at Doncaster.
Murder of its Jockey, Bob Deans,
by its Owner, Henry Bennet."

"What new calamity is this?" he asked himself, as his thoughts flew to Kitty. As soon as possible, he procured all the evening papers and read, with feverish haste, their narratives of the terrible event, from which the main facts stood out clearly enough.

"What will happen next?" he cried in his heart, overcome with amazement and horror.

Owing to its being the holiday season of the year, there were but few men at the Club when Gilbert reached it, but such as were there were conversing about the murder. Bennet was well known to several of them; it was recalled that he was a Varsity oar, but what was principally talked of was his monstrous passion for gambling, which it was guessed was responsible for his present terrible situation. Gilbert listened, but took only a small part in the conversation; it was an immense relief to him to find no reference was made by anybody to Bennet's engagement to Kitty. He hoped it might be possible to keep the girl's name out of the business altogether, but in this he was speedily disappointed.

Next morning the papers were full of the affair. Descriptions of what had taken place at Doncaster were given the utmost prominence, and nothing was left untold that could be put together about Bennet in a short space of time. What was known of his career was published; and amongst other things mention was made of his recent engagement to Miss Kitty Thornton,

daughter of the man whose body had been found a few weeks ago in such strange circumstances in the rooms of the late Mr. Cooper Silwood, and much sympathy was expressed for her. This was the first public announcement of Kitty's engagement to Bennet, and Gilbert, who noticed it with the greatest pain, wondered how this piece of news had been conveyed to the Press. He could not know that Joel Levy, the big money-lender, had talked about it among his friends, through whom it had got to the ears of the reporters.

The same morning, that is the morning after the death of Bob Deans, Kitty saw a long account of it in the columns of the Yorkshire paper that was delivered every morning at Buckhurst House. Prior to reading this statement, Kitty had deemed herself as unhappy as it was possible for any one to be, but when she knew what had happened, she was plunged into deeper misery still. Bennet a murderer, and she engaged to him! It was the last unkindest stroke of fortune. And yet while she was sorry for herself, and much as she detested Bennet, she could not help feeling sorry for him. It did not at first occur to her that he had, by his rash act, if not crime, put an end, in all probability, to their engagement. When that thought did come, as it was bound to come, she drearily speculated what the wretched man in his despair would do; in other words, she feared that the bargain she had entered into with Bennet for the salvation of the Eversleighs was a bargain which in these new circumstances he would not keep.

The papers had announced an inquest was to be held that day, and she awaited the verdict with sickening apprehension. And what might there not appear in these journals in addition to the account of the

inquest? Of course, she told herself, it was quite improbable that Bennet would say anything about the Eversleigh matter at the inquest; but what might he not say, might he not already have said, to others—to the police, for instance? She was not long left in doubt as to the line Bennet intended to take.

The inquest was held in a crowded court which was entirely hostile to Bennet. And that the jury took the darkest view of Bennet's action soon was manifest. A local solicitor, called Deakin, had been retained for him, and he did his best to get a verdict of manslaughter returned, but even if the evidence had been less convincing than it was, the general feeling would still have been too strong for him.

There were plenty of witnesses who agreed, with only small verbal discrepancies which are always a feature of such cases, and confirm rather than detract from the value of the main volume of testimony, as to what had passed between Bennet and Bob Deans. The words used by the two men were quoted by several witnesses with substantial accuracy; particularly the threat of Bennet to the jockey, "I'll kill you!" was brought forward by them all, and practically settled in the minds of coroner and jury the degree of Bennet's guilt.

Bennet, they concluded, had intended killing Bob Deans, and had killed him. The cause of the murder made Bennet's crime blacker and blacker still.

His solicitor tried to show there had not been, there could not be, any premeditation on Bennet's part, and that the deed was done in the heat of passion without there being any real intention to kill the man. He urged that the death of the jockey was of the nature of an accident; his client had certainly struck the blow,

but could not know it was likely to be fatal. The most and worst Bennet was guilty of, Deakin contended, was manslaughter.

But the jury were of another mind. Without retiring to consider their verdict, they at once found Bennet guilty of the wilful murder of the jockey.

It was a verdict which met with general approval. The coroner, in accepting it, said the case was one of the most painful nature, but as it would doubtless form matter for the consideration of a higher court, he would make no further comment upon it.

Like hundreds of thousands of people who were following this dark story of the turf with the most absorbing interest, both Kitty and Gilbert saw the finding of the jury, and later that Bennet had been committed for trial at the next assizes on the capital charge. Kitty, wondering miserably what Bennet would do, thereafter received from him a letter, in which he asked her to visit him in prison without delay. By this time he had been removed from Doncaster to York, and thither Kitty went, accompanied by her relative, Mrs. Joicey, that very day, though it was not until the next that she saw him.

Prison life had already told on Bennet, and she observed a marked change in his appearance, which filled her with pity; but the man was in a black, reckless, defiant humour, as she soon noticed; even the near presence of a warder did not deter him from expressing what was in his mind.

"I'm very, very sorry for you, Harry," she said, and there was the sound of tears in her voice. It was the first time, too, since their engagement that she had called him "Harry."

"Sorry!" he cried. "Do you think I believe that? Don't be a hypocrite. You are glad, you must be glad of my misfortune. You think it will set you free!"

"Oh, Harry, do not think of me; think of yourself!"

"Think of myself!" said Bennet, fiercely, implacably. "Can I not think of myself and of others too?"

The girl involuntarily shrank from him.

"Oh, Harry, Harry!" she said piteously.

"I sent for you," Bennet went on without heeding her appeal, "to tell you that I will not release you. I do not believe that I shall be found guilty of murder—it was no murder, and I shall not release you from your engagement to me. But if I am found guilty, you may be sure I shall not go out of the world without letting it know the truth about Francis Eversleigh. There! That is all! And now you can go."

"Harry, Harry!" cried Kitty; "how can I touch your heart?"

"Touch my heart! The day has gone past for that. Now go—and go at once; the sight of you is torture. Go!"

CHAPTER XXIX

Though Bennet had said to Kitty Thornton that the sight of her was torture to him, yet, when she had departed, her pleading face remained present for a short time in his thoughts and temporarily softened him. But this frame of mind quickly passed, leaving him a prey to hatred, malignity, and the darkest passions.

His devilish humour now prompted him to an act of hideous malice. The idea came to him that if he had Gilbert Eversleigh as his counsel at the forthcoming trial, he would inflict on Gilbert, as well as on Kitty, the most exquisite pain. It was the idea of a fiend rather than of a human being, and showed, as perhaps nothing else could have done, how Bennet's whole nature had been warped to the side of evil. He gloated over this monstrous idea, telling himself that in this way, whatever happened, he would glut his desire for revenge. He knew that, in ordinary circumstances, Gilbert would never consent to appear for him if he could avoid doing so; but a threat to expose Francis Eversleigh would be enough, Bennet believed, to settle the matter. Whether Gilbert would or would not be a good counsel counted for little with him in comparison with the gratification he expected

and promised himself, from seeing the man he had always hated placed in this position.

It was much the same thing as if Bennet had said to Gilbert—

"If you succeed in getting me off from the capital charge, I shall not release Kitty from her engagement, but will marry her after my term of imprisonment has expired. Though I shall be a convict, I shall compel her to marry me, for the same reason that made her engage herself to me.

"Or, if you don't succeed, and I am sentenced to death, and there is no Kitty for me, then you shall not have her; for I will not quit this world without exposing your father and bringing disgrace on you, in which case you will not seek to marry her."

No matter the result of the trial, Bennet assured himself, with diabolical satisfaction, that he would cause Gilbert's heart to suffer the most horrible agony.

He at once took the necessary steps by instructing the local solicitor, Deakin, to have Gilbert Eversleigh retained for his defence. He gave a certain plausibility to this, when discussing it with the lawyer, by representing that Gilbert was well known to him, being the son of the head of the London firm of solicitors who transacted his legal business, as well as that of his father before him. When Deakin, in reply, suggested it might be better, in view of the seriousness of the charge, to employ a more eminent barrister, Bennet peremptorily declined to do so, saying his mind was made up.

Deakin, therefore, put himself in communication with Gilbert, and he naturally did so in this particular case through Eversleigh, Silwood and Eversleigh, though they were not his own London agents.

When Francis Eversleigh received his letter, he instantly perceived the malice and hatred that inspired Bennet's proposal; it was a fresh and bitter blow to himself, but he understood its ingenuity of cruelty was specially aimed at his son. As for himself, he was helpless; all he could do was to send for Gilbert, and lay the letter before him.

Gilbert at first was dumbfounded. He could hardly believe that Bennet at such a time could make such a proposition seriously; but he, too, soon perceived what lay behind it.

"It is infamous!" he cried; "or the man must be out of his head. To select me of all people!"

Then he looked at his father, whose weakness and loss of power were more and more evident every day.

"What am I to do?" he asked. "How can I defend this man?"

"He holds me in the hollow of his hand," observed Francis Eversleigh, with a pathetic shake in his voice.

"I know, I know," said Gilbert. "And I suppose I must appear for him. But the thing is an outrage——"

Gilbert was interrupted by a loud knocking at the door of his father's room—it was no ordinary knocking, but a knocking that spoke of some strong emotion on the part of the person who knocked.

Gilbert strode to the door and opened it. The clerk who had replaced Williamson was standing there, and on his face was a terrified expression.

"I must speak to Mr. Eversleigh immediately," he said hurriedly.

"What is it, Mr. Whittaker?" asked Eversleigh, with a quick agitation.

"I should like, begging Mr. Gilbert's pardon, to

see you in private, sir," returned Whittaker, confusedly. "Please come into Mr. Silwood's room; there is no need for Mr. Gilbert to go from here. It is something I must show you personally in Mr. Silwood's room."

"But of what nature is it?"

"That I can scarcely tell, but you may be able to do so."

Francis Eversleigh said no more, but went with Whittaker into Silwood's room. In a few moments he came back alone, looking so shattered that as soon as his son saw him he rushed forward to assist him. When Gilbert offered him his arm, he took it at once, and Gilbert could feel how his father shook and trembled.

"What has happened?" he asked, after helping his father into a chair.

"Yes, in a minute," stammered the other; "I am horribly upset, and I can stand so little now! In a minute I'll tell you all."

He lay back in his chair with his eyes closed—the mere wreck of the handsome man he once had been.

"A very strange thing has taken place, Gilbert," he said after a while—"a very strange thing indeed!"

Eversleigh stopped, and Gilbert patiently waited till his father spoke again, his heart full of compassion and sorrow. For the moment, he forgot Bennet, and could think of nothing save the pitiable state of his father.

At length Francis Eversleigh recovered himself sufficiently to stand up.

"Come with me," he said to Gilbert, "to Mr. Silwood's room—that will be the simplest way of making you acquainted with what has happened."

And Gilbert, with mingled feelings of curiosity

and alarm, followed his father to the next floor. Halfway down the stairs, Eversleigh halted.

"Whittaker thinks it's a burglary," he whispered mysteriously in Gilbert's ear.

"A burglary! In the office!" said Gilbert, incredulously in a low voice.

"Wait," cautioned Eversleigh. "Wait until you see."

And now they were in Silwood's room, which was still known as Silwood's, though it knew Silwood no more. It was changed, however, but little since he had sat in it and worked his wicked will.

"Close the door, Gilbert," said Eversleigh.

The son obeyed, and then glanced about him. He could see no sign of disturbance, nothing that indicated specially the burglary of which his father had given a suggestion on the stairs. There were in the room, as of yore, the same table, chair, book-cases, deed-boxes; all were arranged in the way that was familiar enough to him. The large japanned box stood by itself in the usual corner. There appeared to be absolutely no hint of anything out of the ordinary. This rapid scrutiny over, Gilbert looked at his father inquiringly.

"You don't notice anything particularly?" asked Eversleigh.

"No; that is, at a superficial glance."

"I wish you to examine the bottom of that box," said Eversleigh, pointing to the large japanned box in the corner. "You and Mr. Archer Martin have recently had constant access to it for the purpose of going over Mr. Silwood's books and papers; you therefore know it well. Now you will see something I am sure you

know nothing of. I did not know of it myself—not until Whittaker showed me it."

While Eversleigh was speaking, his son was looking at the foot of the box, from which he saw there protruded a narrow strip of metal.

"What do you make of *that?*" asked the father, huskily.

"I should say it was a sort of secret chamber—you can't exactly call it a drawer," Gibert replied, after a study of the box. "I knew nothing of it; you are right there. How has it been discovered? What was found in it?" he inquired eagerly, while other questions came thronging into his mind. "When was this discovery made?" he went on.

"It was made this morning," replied Eversleigh. "Whittaker tells me he had occasion to come into the room a few minutes ago to get a paper which he thought he'd find here. He could not lay his hand on it quickly, and had to hunt for it. Quite by accident, as he was searching, he happened to observe a strip of metal at the foot of the box sticking out. Naturally, he went and examined the box, and then saw the secret chamber, which he declares was empty, and I don't doubt it. Now he is positive that when he saw the box yesterday this secret chamber was closed."

"Positive! In what way?"

"It seems that he and one of the other clerks required to move the box yesterday. And he maintains that one or other of them, or both, must have seen the secret chamber if it had been open then. He concludes, of course, that it has been opened since he saw it last. His theory is that it was opened last night by a burglar. I don't know whether he really believes

that; it appears preposterous and beyond possibility that any ordinary burglar would be acquainted with this secret chamber."

Gilbert nodded his agreement. He had listened carefully to his father, but at the same time had been trying to understand how the mechanism was worked by which the chamber was opened and closed. It baffled him, however, and he desisted from the attempt.

"What do you make of it?" asked the father.

"Do you believe Whittaker right in thinking the chamber was opened last night?" inquired Gilbert.

"I do."

"But that he was wrong in putting it down to a burglar?"

"Yes. Do burglars break into lawyer's rooms? I don't mean to say that such a thing is impossible, for valuable documents have been stolen—you can imagine that."

"Of course. But if the secret chamber was not opened by a burglar, then by whom was it opened?"

"That is the question," said Eversleigh, gazing earnestly at his son.

"Whoever opened the secret chamber knew of its existence," Gilbert went on, thinking the matter out aloud.

"Undoubtedly. He knew of its existence, and he also had the means of opening it."

Gilbert suddenly started, for an extraordinary notion had come into his mind. His father saw the start, and thought he knew its meaning. The two men looked at each other strangely.

"Only two men in the world, I feel certain, knew

of that chamber," Eversleigh resumed. "One was the mechanic who devised and made it, the other was——"

"Cooper Silwood!" exclaimed Gilbert.

"Yes, Cooper Silwood."

"But Silwood is dead, so you would say that it was the other? That seems absurd."

"It is absurd. What would the mechanic who made the box care about taking anything out of the secret chamber? Once his job of making the thing was finished, he would be finished with it altogether. No, it was not the mechanic."

Gilbert was silent.

"Don't you see?" asked Eversleigh.

"Silwood!"

"Precisely."

"But that is impossible. Dead men do not open secret chambers," said Gilbert, but there was something curious and suggestive in the manner of his saying it.

"No. Dead men do not open secret chambers, but living ones do. Silwood is not dead! He is alive!"

Eversleigh's voice rose into a shout and then cracked.

"It seems inconceivable."

"Yet there is no other conclusion. The maker of the box being out of the question, it follows that it must have been Silwood. I believe he was here last night and removed from the secret chamber something of particular value to him."

"Silwood might have told some one of it," objected Gilbert.

"Is it likely? You know he was the least communicative of men."

"What about Williamson?"

"I feel confident he knew nothing of it either. Don't you see this secret chamber was a receptacle in which Silwood hid papers or other things he had an object in concealing? You may be certain he told no one of it. If he had told any one, would he not have told me? No, Gilbert; from the moment I knew of Whittaker's discovery I suspected the truth."

"But the certificate of his death?"

"It was a false certificate."

"Strange I had not thought of that before, once I knew the kind of man he was!"

"Silwood is alive," Eversleigh once more, but with less vigour, declared, after a pause of some duration.

All through the conversation up to this point he had carried himself, supported by excitement, with some degree of his former buoyancy, but now he seemed to sink rapidly into a state of apathy, while Gilbert regarded him anxiously.

"I don't know what's to be done next," murmured Eversleigh, feebly.

"Some one must go to Italy," said Gilbert, emphatically, "and find out the truth—that's what must be done!"

"Then," said his father, "you must go!"

CHAPTER XXX

"I?" ASKED Gilbert.

"Yes," Francis Eversleigh replied, with some decision. "I can do nothing. In fact, I am physically and mentally unfit to do anything of importance at present. The discovery of the secret chamber, indicating as it must that Silwood is alive, supplied me with a sort of stimulus, but that is passing off, and I feel as weak and helpless as a child. I feel," he went on, while he slowly put his hand to his forehead, "as if I were going mad. It is an awful feeling!"

"Father!"

"Oh," cried Eversleigh, "this business will be the death of me! I know it!"

These words, Gilbert told himself, were caused by the reaction to which his father had alluded, and were not to be taken literally, but he gazed solicitously at the other.

"No wonder you are depressed, father," he said, in a sympathetic tone. "Well, I'll go to Italy," he added in another voice.

"That's right! Don't mind me! You must go at once, my boy."

"Yes, but what about Bennet? We have rather lost sight of him, have we not?"

"I think we need not consider Bennet at the

moment. I shall answer his lawyer and say you are willing to be retained for Bennet's defence."

"You deem that best?"

"What choice have I, Gilbert?"

Gilbert shrugged his shoulders.

"There is no alternative," continued Eversleigh. "But some time must pass before the trial; indeed, you will have a good many weeks to come and go upon. Surely that will give you plenty of room for making your inquiries. Still, there is no saying—the task may be very difficult."

Eversleigh paused, lost in thought.

"You would not bring the police into the thing?" Gilbert asked suggestively.

"Not at first. Later, perhaps, but I don't know; it must depend on circumstances one can neither foresee nor control. I shall certainly say not a word at this juncture to the police."

"What about the Foreign Office people?"

"Yes, that is a good idea. I think your best plan is to go and see, if you can, Sir John Manners, the Under-Secretary, whom I know very well. I'll give you a note to him, and request him to make your path as smooth as possible. If you see him personally, I should be inclined to tell him in confidence what we now believe about Silwood—that is, if he is at all encouraging in his manner. You must judge for yourself."

"I understand," said Gilbert.

"I should ask him for an introduction to the British Ambassador at Rome. It might prove very useful. Arm yourself with the best credentials you can get; but of course you must be guided largely by what Sir John says."

"Yes," assented Gilbert. "But suppose he is not at the Foreign Office? At this time of the year so many officials are away on holiday"

"You can see, at any rate, the man next to him; still, it would be far better to see Sir John."

"I had better set off for Downing Street immediately," said Gilbert, but he did not at once move. Instead, he looked very thoughtful; at length he spoke. "You have no doubt about Silwood being alive, sir?"

"None whatever."

"You believe he was here last night—here, in London, in this office?"

"Certainly."

"Then should we not look for him in London?"

"A natural question; but does not that mean bringing in the police?"

"There are private detectives to be got. I have one at this moment on the track of Russell, who bought so much from Silwood."

"I do not object to having a private detective employed, but I have a strong impression—it amounts really to a certainty—that the clue is to be picked up in Camajore, where Silwood was reported to have died. On the face of the certificate, which we now believe to be a false one, there is written, plain as if it had been in ink, collusion between Silwood and the Syndic. They were, you may be sure, in league, and they may be so still. Be that as it may, you can make investigations, which I am positive will have valuable results."

Eversleigh leaned back wearily, fatigued with so much speaking.

"Will you try and find Sir John at the Foreign

Office, then return and let me know? Meanwhile I'll rest a little," said Eversleigh.

In a couple of hours Gilbert was back again in Lincoln's Inn. He had been lucky enough in his errand. He had seen the Under-Secretary, who had given him the introduction he had wanted to the Ambassador at the Quirinal.

"I did not think it necessary to tell Sir John," said Gilbert, relating what had taken place at the Foreign Office, "anything regarding what we now know about Silwood. On the way to Downing Street I went over the circumstances carefully, and I came to the conclusion that it might serve our purpose well enough merely to say to him that, as Silwood had died in Italy, you desired me to make inquiries, to see the body had been buried decently, to have a tombstone put up, and so on. And that it would, or might be, of great service if he would give me a note to the Ambassador, to be presented, however, only if an occasion arose for doing so."

"And Sir John was satisfied?"

"Perfectly. He was very nice about it, and said he was delighted to be of use to you."

Eversleigh smiled wanly. Then he spread out on his table some papers, which Gilbert saw were the certificate of Silwood's death, the letter of Ugo Ucelli, the Syndic of Camajore, that had accompanied it, and the envelope in which both had been enclosed.

"It occurred to me," observed Eversleigh, "that it would be well for you to take these with you."

He handed them to his son.

"Do you recall the contents of the Syndic's letter?" he went on. "Perhaps you had better have the translation."

"I remember what he said in a general sort of way, but the translation might be a help," replied Gilbert.

"Well, here it is," said Eversleigh, drawing a folded sheet from a packet.

Gilbert read the translation rapidly, and asked—

"Did you ever answer the letter?"

"Not beyond sending a formal acknowledgment."

"The letter speaks of Silwood having left certain effects, which the Syndic says are in his possession; he asks you what is to be done with them."

"I know, I know," remarked Eversleigh. "Of course, if the circumstances had been normal, I should have attended to the Syndic's letter fully. But I was in no state to do so. The letter, you must remember, came on the day of the discovery of Morris Thornton's body—was, indeed, the immediate cause of the discovery. Before that—ever since Silwood's confession—I was too upset to give my mind to business properly, and since that I have been able to attend to nothing as it ought to be attended to."

And Eversleigh sighed painfully.

"I would not brood on that, sir," observed Gilbert.

"I cannot help it; but never mind me just now. I suppose you will leave to-night for Genoa; you ought to be there in thirty-six hours or so. Therefore you should see the Syndic, if he is at the place still, in two days from now. His letter to me gives you an opening. You can tell him I asked you to find out what effects Silwood left."

"That will do very well indeed," said Gilbert.

A few minutes later he bade his father good-bye, and left that evening for the Continent. In forty-eight

hours he was in Camajore, and lost no time in hunting up Ugo Ucelli, its Syndic, or Chief Magistrate.

Ucelli, a medium-sized man of characteristically Italian appearance, received him with extreme politeness. When the Syndic understood Gilbert did not know Italian, he conversed with him in French, a language both were proficient in.

Gilbert made known who he was, and the errand on which, ostensibly, he had come.

"Ah! that poor Monsieur Silwood," said Ucelli. "His was an extremely sad case. But what would you? It was the will of God."

Gilbert kept his eyes fixed on the man, and studied his face closely, as if he could in that way penetrate its inmost secrets.

"The cholera was everywhere," continued Ucelli, "and many died besides M. Silwood. It has been a great calamity. Alas! but it is the will of God! the will of God!"

The repetition of the phrase irritated Gilbert.

"A pestilence is always terrible," he said, but somewhat bluntly. "You did all you could, I am sure, for Mr. Silwood."

"The best doctors, nurses, care—everything. But, alas! it was the will of God."

"What a consummate hypocrite the man must be!" thought Gilbert. Aloud he said, "Was the body buried near here?"

"In the churchyard. Come, let me show you his tomb."

As they went together down the single street of which Camajore consists, towards the church, Gilbert said his father had specially charged him to discuss

with Ucelli what was to be done with the effects Silwood had left behind him, and which were now in the Syndic's possession.

"Yes; when we return to my house I will show you them. There is not much—some letters, a pocket-book containing a few pounds in notes, and some gold and silver, the money amounting in all to about twenty pounds English. There is also a watch, and I believe that is all. As Syndic I have kept them, but, of course, am very willing to hand them over to the proper authority. Indeed, I shall be very glad to do so."

By this time the two men had reached the graveyard. On entering it, Ucelli pointed to the numerous mounds on which the earth was comparatively fresh.

"The cholera," he said; "it was the cholera! Alas! it was the will of God!"

Gilbert nodded, his face set and stern.

"See," said the Syndic, when they had advanced a few steps, pointing to a mound, "that is where the body of M. Silwood lies."

In appearance this mound differed in no respect from the rest.

"Do you think of erecting a monument to M. Silwood?" asked Ucelli. "If so, I can have it made for you here."

"No," replied Gilbert, shortly. "What I intend to do is to remove the body to England."

"The body removed to England!" said the Syndic, who had given a great start on hearing Gilbert's statement.

"Yes; that seems best," remarked Gilbert, watching Ucelli keenly, and noticing his surprise.

"But think! he died of cholera! The law will

forbid—it does forbid—the body of one who has died of cholera from being removed. It is therefore impossible, I regret to tell you, for you to carry out your intention. I am very sorry, for your idea is a natural one; but the law, monsieur, the law will not permit it."

"There's a good deal of cleverness about this plot," thought Gilbert. But he said to Ucelli, "I am very sorry to hear this. Is there no way of getting over the difficulty?"

"No way, monsieur, none whatever. It is impossible. It is the law. And it is also common sense," he added, smoothly and courteously. "On reflection you must admit it."

"Suppose the law did not forbid it," asked Gilbert, "what should I have to do in order to be allowed to remove the body?"

"The authorities must give permission."

"What authorities?"

"At Rome. I can do nothing in such a matter; it is too high for me."

"Then to Rome I must go," said Gilbert to himself. But he talked no more on this subject with the Syndic, who accordingly thought Gilbert was satisfied, and had abandoned any idea he might have had of removing the body to England.

Then they went to the office of the Syndic, and there Gilbert was shown the effects to which allusion had already been made. In addition to the articles and sums of money mentioned by Ucelli, there were two leather valises and some clothing. The Syndic explained that it had been necessary to burn most of the clothes that had belonged to Silwood.

"If you would like to examine or look into anything," said Ucelli, "you are at liberty to do so. It is, perhaps, slightly irregular, as you are not a relative of the deceased, but I make no objection."

"Everything has been carefully planned," thought Gilbert, as he mentally took note of the various objects. "They have succeeded in making the thing look perfectly natural and what would be expected in the circumstances. The watch, the clothes, the money, the letters, the travelling-bags, are just what one would expect to find as the dead man's effects, if he had been a dead man."

"To give you these, I shall require to have an order from the Government," said Ucelli.

"The Government at Rome?"

"Yes."

"I suppose, then," said Gilbert, "I had better go on to Rome?"

"That is your best course," agreed Ucelli, without suspicion, and he bade Gilbert *bon-voyage*.

CHAPTER XXXI

While Ucelli, Syndic of Camajore, was congratulating himself he had played his part so well that he had as little to fear from Gilbert Eversleigh as from the detective Brydges, or the journalist Westgate, who had come to make inquiries respecting the death of Cooper Silwood, Gilbert, on the other hand, was congratulating himself that, owing to the final turn of their conversation, his going on to Rome seemed to the Syndic the right and proper thing to be done.

If Ucelli had suspected Gilbert had a twofold object in view, he would have taken all the means in his power to prevent him from attaining it; but he thought Gilbert had dropped any idea he might have entertained of opening Silwood's grave, and now had no other end than to obtain the necessary authorization by which Silwood's effects would be handed to him. The Syndic's mind, therefore, was at ease.

On his way to the Italian capital, Gilbert considered the situation. He did not doubt that the law with regard to the removal of a cholera-infected body was what Ucelli stated, and he foresaw it might be difficult, perhaps impossible, for him to accomplish his purpose. He hoped, however, that he might put such stress on his belief that in Silwood's grave was no body at all, as would lead the British Ambassador to make strong

representations that in this case there could be no danger in opening the grave.

On his arrival in Rome, Gilbert called at the Embassy immediately, only to be told that Lord Prestonkirk, the Ambassador, was not in the city, but was staying at a house he had in the mountains many miles away. Thither, accordingly, Gilbert went, the journey involving the loss of a day, at which he fretted not a little.

The kindness of his reception by Lord Prestonkirk speedily caused him to forget his vexation.

Lord Prestonkirk was one of the ablest and most experienced diplomatists in the English service. He had spent a great many years at the Foreign Office in London, becoming eventually the Permanent Under-Secretary, a position he had occupied with great distinction until the Prime Minister, who was also Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, had offered him the Embassy at Rome.

Gilbert presented his letter of introduction from Sir John Manners, the Ambassador's successor as Permanent Under-Secretary, to Lord Prestonkirk, who at once said he would be very glad to do anything in his power to assist him.

"I have come to your Excellency," said Gilbert, after thanking the Ambassador for his courteous reception, "to consult you confidentially on a very serious matter. I must unfold to you a strange story, and ask for your assistance, or, at least, advice. It is connected with the death of Mr. Silwood, my father's partner."

"I remember hearing of Mr. Silwood's death," said Lord Prestonkirk, "in the north of Italy some weeks ago. Cholera, was it not?"

"So it was said," replied Gilbert. "My father received the intelligence in a letter from the Syndic of Camajore, the place of Mr. Silwood's death; a certificate of the death accompanied the letter. Here they are," Gilbert continued, taking them from his pocket, and placing them before the Ambassador. "Please read them."

"The certificate is in the usual form," said Lord Prestonkirk, "and the Syndic's letter shows that everything was done for the unfortunate man that could be done. That is satisfactory."

"I have just come from Camajore," remarked Gilbert, "where I saw the Syndic. You will notice that in his letter he speaks of Mr. Silwood having left certain effects; they will be handed over to me on my obtaining the proper authority."

"And you wish my help in the matter?"

"Yes, your Excellency; but this is only the beginning. I told you I had a strange story to unfold," said Gilbert. "To put the matter as briefly as possible, I—or rather, I should say, my father and I—have reason to believe that the certificate of Mr. Silwood's death is a false certificate, that the letter of the Syndic is nothing but a clever piece of fiction, and that Silwood is alive."

"What!" exclaimed the Ambassador. "Are you quite serious in making these statements?"

He looked at Gilbert incredulously.

"I certainly should not make them," answered Gilbert, gravely, "unless there was good ground for them. And as I do not believe that Silwood is dead, it follows that I do not believe his body lies buried at Camajore. It is regarding this that I beseech your Excellency's assistance."

The Ambassador was silent, but his face wore a perplexed expression.

"What you have said suggests, Mr. Eversleigh," remarked Lord Prestonkirk, after a lengthy pause, "something criminal, that is, if you are right in your belief. I am afraid that I am not the proper person exactly to come to. But tell me succinctly what you thought you would ask me to do in the case."

"I wished you to help me with the Italian Government by getting, or by putting me in the way of getting, authority to have the alleged grave of Silwood opened up."

"I see. But supposing I did try to do this for you, it must be obvious to you that I should have to bring forward some very convincing argument. Graves are not opened except for special reasons."

"I know," responded Gilbert. "I was prepared for what you urge, and I must tell you all. But in doing so, I am placing the honour of my father in your hands."

The Ambassador bowed.

"Mr. Eversleigh," he said, somewhat stiffly, "you must please yourself as to what you tell me."

"I beg your Excellency's pardon," cried Gilbert; "but it is not too much to say that it is a matter of life and death to my father and myself. Pardon me, I beg of you."

"Well, I'm ready to listen," said Lord Prestonkirk, more graciously. "Indeed, I am a good deal interested. You have said enough to show me that there is some strange story, as you stated, and if I can be of any service to you, you may count upon me."

Then Gilbert told him all.

The Ambassador listened with great attention, asking a question now and again as Gilbert proceeded with his tale. When it was finished, Lord Prestonkirk remarked that he had never heard a stranger story.

"You believe," he asked, "that the testimony of the secret chamber is absolutely convincing of Silwood's being alive?"

"Yes."

"Was there no one else who could have opened it?"

"No one but the maker, and he is out of the question. Who, beside Silwood, would have any object in opening it?"

"The conclusion is just," acknowledged the Ambassador; "and I believe, with you and your father, that the man is alive; everything undoubtedly points that way. But as I hinted, I think, to you already, it is really a case for the police."

"Later it will in all probability be," said Gilbert; speaking with great earnestness. "But at present my strong desire and hope is that I may be able to trace Silwood, lay hands on him, and get from him, in some way or other, an explanation of certain transactions which he negotiated in the course of his defalcations. If I were to have him arrested when found, it would most likely be impossible to get him to say anything."

"I understand," said the Ambassador, but he looked at Gilbert dubiously.

"I believe he had a confederate," Gilbert went on, as he saw Lord Prestonkirk did not altogether follow him. "Let me explain a little more fully. The accountant who went over his books and papers found that large transactions had taken place between Silwood and a certain James Russell. Inquiries were

made about this Russell, and it turned out he was quite a poor man, or, at all events, a man living in a very poor way in Stepney—not in the least the sort of man to engage in large financial operations. I fancy he was a man of straw over whom, perhaps, Silwood may have had some hold, and that Silwood made use of him when a man of straw was needed. We found that this man had recently left Stepney, and I have employed a private detective to hunt him down."

"What did you say his name was?"

"James Russell."

"Ah!" exclaimed Lord Prestonkirk.

"Is it possible your Excellency knows anything of him?"

"Perhaps. Do you happen to know what he was like in appearance?"

"We could get no accurate description of the man. His neighbours said he was seldom at home; they thought he was a workman."

"Well, it may only be a case of coincidence," said the Ambassador; "but the man's connection with Silwood suggests it may be something more than a coincidence. It happened one day last month, August, that there was a person giving the name of James Russell, and described as a workman, a British subject, stabbed in the streets of Genoa. He was wounded in the side, but not severely. Though he refused to prosecute the person who knifed him, and the thing was hushed up, the affair was reported to me, as it might have led to trouble. There was no prosecution, however, and I took very little interest in it, but the man's name comes back to me."

"It is more than a trifle curious," said Gilbert,

musingly, "and I shall not forget what you have told me."

This he said aloud, but inwardly he was asking himself if it might not be that, after all, Silwood had communicated to James Russell the method of opening the secret chamber. If that were the case, then the proof on which they built the idea of Silwood's being alive was not so convincing as they had thought. He kept this, however, to himself.

"I should say it was the same man," remarked the Ambassador. "As I tell you, I attached no importance to the matter at the time, since it led to no trouble. Now, it seems very odd that this workman, James Russell, did not try to get compensation for his injury—that looks strange in an ordinary workman. Then there is the fact that Silwood was in the same neighbourhood."

Lord Prestonkirk gazed at Gilbert.

"Your story grows upon me, Mr. Eversleigh," continued the Ambassador. "I am immensely interested, and I'll see what I an do. But once more I must tell you that it is a case for the police."

"I admit that it would be so under ordinary circumstances. But, your Excellency, I must think of my father. I must try to save him. I do not see how I am to do it, I confess; but while there is the slightest chance of getting fuller information than we now possess of what Silwood did, I cannot abandon all hope. You see my position?"

"And sympathize with it; but still—still, it is all very irregular."

"But you will help me?"

"There will be difficulties. You see, I cannot tell

the Italian authorities what you have told me. I cannot use the same arguments with them that you have used with me. Still, I am going to try what I can do. There is a detective in all of us, and you have excited the detective in me, and if I can get that grave opened for you, it shall be opened."

Gilbert thanked the Ambassador warmly.

"I shall be in Rome the day after to-morrow," said Lord Prestonkirk, as he shook hands with Gilbert. "Come and see me in the afternoon."

CHAPTER XXXII

Gilbert returned to Rome, well content with his success so far. He felt that Lord Prestonkirk was genuinely interested, and therefore would do all he possibly could to help him. But, at the same time, what he had heard concerning James Russell filled his mind with disquiet and uncertainty.

The presence of James Russell in Northern Italy at or about the date of Silwood's reported death was in itself startling. True, there were many James Russells in the world, and this particular James Russell who had been wounded in the streets of Genoa, might not be the James Russell whom he regarded as Silwood's confederate or accomplice; but Gilbert had little or no doubt that he was the man he wanted so much to find.

And if this were the case, what then? What was this man doing in Northern Italy, a few miles from Camajore? The answer evidently was that he had been in touch with Silwood.

Again Gilbert was forced to ask himself, Might not Silwood, after all, be dead and buried at Camajore, as the Syndic had said? If that were so, then Silwood must have communicated a knowledge of the secret chamber to Russell before his death, and the secret

chamber must have been opened by Russell. On a review of all the circumstances, Gilbert was compelled to acknowledge that this might be the explanation. If it were, it was obvious that he must try harder than ever to lay James Russell by the heels. But he was still determined to have the grave opened. For if Silwood's body were in it, then there was no more to be said on that head, and Cooper Silwood would disappear finally from the story, leaving the mystery of Lincoln's Inn for ever unsolved.

Gilbert wrote to his father, Francis Everleigh, an account of what he had done and of what he had heard with regard to James Russell. He also communicated with the private detective he was employing to track Russell down.

At the time fixed, Gilbert went to see the Ambassador, but it was only to meet with disappointment.

"I must ask you," said Lord Prestonkirk, "to exercise a little patience, as it may be a day or two before the matter can be settled one way or the other. I saw the Minister for Foreign Affairs, and told him what you wished. Of course I did not tell him what you told me, but I said I believed there were good reasons for my supporting your application for having the grave opened. I dare say he thinks that it has something to do with politics. Be that as it may, we are on excellent terms, and he promised to see about it, but said it was outside his department, and he must speak to the Minister of Justice, as such affairs were under his control."

"I am greatly obliged to you," said Gilbert, earnestly. "Can you give me any idea when you will hear from the Minister again?"

"Very soon, I think. I urged that the matter was most important, and said that I should deem it a personal favour if there was as little delay as possible."

"You are most kind," said Gilbert, "and I don't know how I am to thank you sufficiently."

"Pray do not try, Mr. Eversleigh. You see," continued the Ambassador with a smile, "you have aroused my curiosity, and I must say I am quite keen to know the truth. Come again to-morrow, and perhaps I may have something definite to tell you."

Gilbert called at the Embassy the following day, scarcely expecting to hear the "something definite" of which Lord Prestonkirk had spoken, but to his joy he did.

"I have to tell you," said the Ambassador, cordially, "of a most unexpected piece of good fortune."

"You have succeeded!" cried Gilbert, excitedly.

"Yes; but let me tell you how it came about. It appears that Ucelli, the Syndic of Camajore, has been for a long time in the black books of his superior, the Minister of Justice. This is the piece of good fortune so far as you are concerned. As soon as he heard that Ucelli was suspected of having issued a false death certificate, he instantly said that such a charge must be immediately investigated. So far as I can make out, the Minister was delighted with the opportunity of making things particularly unpleasant for Ucelli, on whom he has had an eye for months. I imagine he is anxious to find a sufficient reason for removing him from his position. You will get the benefit of the Minister's being in this frame of mind. It is a lucky thing for you, and I hope it is a good omen of your success."

"Thank you again and again," said Gilbert. "I am infinitely indebted to your Excellency. What can I do to show how thankful I am?"

"There is one way," replied the Ambassador, kindly. "I wish you to keep me informed of what takes place —I want to know the sequel to this strange story into which you have brought me."

"Oh, I shall be very glad to let you know what happens; I should have done that in any case. Now, your Excellency, what is the next move?"

"The Minister of Justice is determined that the matter shall be probed to the bottom," rejoined Lord Prestonkirk. "He is therefore sending to Camajore no less a person than his Deputy-Minister. I was rather surprised to hear it, for the Deputy-Minister is quite a great man, but it indicates the importance the Minister attaches to the investigation, and you may be sure it will be thorough."

"I am very glad to hear it," said Gilbert, but he had hardly uttered these words when a sort of dread came over him that Silwood's body might be found in the grave. He steadily refused, however, to let his mind dwell on this idea.

"All that remains for me to do now, Mr. Eversleigh," said the Ambassador, "is to give you a line to the Minister of Justice by way of introduction; you had better go and call on him at once."

"Yes, I will do so."

Lord Prestonkirk wrote a short note, and handing it to Gilbert, wished him good-bye and good luck.

"Don't forget to let me know—eh—the sequel," smiled the Ambassador, as he shook hands with Gilbert.

Arrived, within a few minutes of his leaving the

Embassy, at the Ministry of Justice, Gilbert was almost immediately ushered into the presence of Signor Fava, the Minister. Finding that Gilbert did not know Italian, Signor Fava conversed with him in English.

"You believe Ucelli to be in a plot," said the Minister, after some discussion, "to screen this Mr. Silwood? Yes; but there is one question I must ask: Why has he tried to screen Mr. Silwood? What was, or is, the consideration?"

"I do not know what was, or is, the connection between the two," replied Gilbert.

"Ucelli must have been offered some strong inducement."

"That is probable, most probable."

"It must be inquired into, it must!"

The Minister touched an electric bell, and his Secretary entered the room.

"Please request Signor Vinci to come to me," the Minister said in Italian to his subordinate, who forthwith withdrew.

"Signor Vinci," the Minister explained to Gilbert, "is my Deputy. I merely desire to introduce you to him. I have already asked him to arrange with you when to go to Camajore. When do you intend to go?"

"I should like to go at once—that is, if it is convenient to Signor Vinci."

"How would to-morrow do?"

"Capitally."

A tall, swarthy man, with a determined-looking face, now came in.

"Mr. Eversleigh," said the Minister, "this is the Deputy-Minister, Signor Vinci. He has already received

his instructions, and if you can go to-morrow, so can he. And you will find that he can speak English as well as or better than I."

"Oh no, Excellency," protested the Deputy. "But I am certainly quite ready to go with Mr. Eversleigh to-morrow, if that suits him."

And so it was arranged.

Before setting out next morning, Gilbert received a telegram from his brother Ernest, which made him very sad. It ran—

"Father seriously ill, but immediate danger not apprehended. He is unable to attend office. I opened your last letter to him, but am completely fogged as to its meaning."

"My father seriously ill," thought Gilbert. "How he has suffered! If the worst happens, it will have been Silwood who has killed him! And the office! How long can it go on in my father's absence without something being discovered and a catastrophe precipitated? What a terrible situation! What am I to do?" he asked himself, greatly agitated. But a little reflection convinced him that it was his duty to proceed to Camajore. Still, his brother's message chilled and depressed his spirits.

It was towards the middle of the afternoon when Gilbert and Signor Vinci walked up the single street of Camajore to the residence of Ucelli.

The Syndic saw the Deputy-Minister with surprise, but was far from guessing the real cause of his appearance.

"It is about the effects of that poor Signor Silwood you have come," he said to Signor Vinci in Italian, "along with Signor Eversleigh, is it not?"

"The effects," said Vinci, diplomatically; "yes. Let me see them."

The Syndic produced the money and the various articles which had belonged to Silwood.

"I will give you a receipt for them," said the Deputy, "and take them with me to Rome. They will eventually be given to the person or persons who can show the best claim to them."

"That is quite correct," agreed the Syndic, obsequiously. "Will your Excellency take them now?"

"Yes."

The Deputy-Minister, the look of determination on his face which it habitually wore suddenly becoming sharply accentuated, snapped out the "Yes" so harshly that Ucelli could not help noticing it; there was that in it which made him quake. He glanced at the Deputy to see if he could interpret the swift change in his manner.

"Mr. Eversleigh," said Vinci, crisply, "has proffered a request to the Minister of Justice, and his Excellency will comply with it. This request was that the grave of Mr. Silwood should be opened, and the body removed to England. It is permitted."

"But, Excellency," urged the Syndic, "pray consider the circumstances. Mr. Silwood died of cholera."

"I am aware of it," said the Deputy. "Of course, every precaution science can suggest must be taken. But the command of the Minister admits of no discussion. The grave must be opened, and that to-day; now, or at any rate as soon as possible."

"But, Excellency!" began Ucelli, "I——"

"Say no more! The matter is settled, and I am

here to see the grave is opened and the body given over to Mr. Eversleigh."

"A thousand pardons, but, Excellency, I shall be able to get no one to dig. Everybody knows Mr. Silwood died of cholera; and who amongst the villagers will have the courage to face the pestilence?"

"But with proper precautions?"

"Alas! our simple people do not understand precautions; they do understand what death from cholera means by the way of infection."

"I must say I do not comprehend the objection, if the necessary precautions are taken. No, signor, let us to work at once. I will go with you and procure disinfectants, and, thereafter, the grave-diggers, while Mr. Eversleigh rests here. Come!"

The Syndic scanned the Deputy's face, but it was uncompromisingly resolute.

"There is no need for your Excellency to put yourself to the trouble of going with me—I can easily see to all that is required," suggested Ucelli.

"I prefer to go with you," replied the Deputy, with unmistakable decision. Then he added, "My authority may be of some use to you, signor, with the grave-diggers."

And the voice of the Deputy was exceedingly grim, while Ucelli turned a sickly white and found nothing more to say.

CHAPTER XXXIII

"COME!" said the Deputy-Minister peremptorily to Ucelli. "Meanwhile, Mr. Eversleigh, do you remain here till we return. I do not think you will have to wait very long."

"Very well, signor," Gilbert replied, though he would have preferred accompanying the two Italians.

"Come!" cried the Deputy once more to Ucelli.

But the Syndic had now found his tongue. He begged the Deputy to give him a few moments' private conversation in the next room.

"You can say what you have to say here, surely. If you speak in our own language, Mr. Eversleigh will not understand you, so you will be quite safe."

Ucelli urged that Mr. Eversleigh was evidently a highly intelligent man, and must have picked up some knowledge of Italian. Therefore, with all respect to the Deputy-Minister, he ventured to think it possible Mr. Eversleigh might understand. And again he requested a private interview, which finally was granted to him.

The Deputy and the Syndic retired to an adjoining room, and left Gilbert alone with his thoughts.

His thoughts were a strange jumble. In the foreground of them were Silwood, James Russell, the Syndic,

and the Deputy-Minister, but behind them were his father, Kitty, and Harry Bennet. As he sat there, they all presently seemed to mingle, to become obscure, as in some feverish dream, and then to stand out sharp and clear again.

Perhaps half an hour had passed when there rang through the house the report of a revolver, immediately followed by the sounds of a struggle and the cries and shouts of those engaged in it.

Gilbert sprang to his feet at once, and ran into the next room, from which the noise had come.

There, on the floor, were Ucelli, and above him the Deputy-Minister holding him by the throat. A little distance away lay a revolver; there was the smell of burnt powder in the air, while the furniture of the apartment was in disorder.

"Get something," panted the Deputy, "with which we can bind and secure him, Mr. Eversleigh. Take that table-cover and tear it up—that will do."

Gilbert, who had of course easily grasped the situation, did as he was bid, and in two or three minutes the Syndic was bound hand and foot.

"You are not hurt?" Gilbert inquired of the Deputy. "I heard the sound of a shot."

"No; though it was not Ucelli's fault. He deliberately tried to kill me, but I was too quick for him," said the Deputy, still gasping. "I will tell you all when I have recovered a little."

And breathing heavily, he seated himself on a chair. Gilbert glanced at Ucelli—the man's face was the colour of paper.

"First of all," said Signor Vinci, after an interval, "he tried to bribe me, and failing in that, sought to

kill me, though what he hoped to gain by killing me I cannot understand."

"It was the act of a madman."

"You would say he was driven to it by despair? That, perhaps, is the explanation; or it may be he expected to make good his escape. But you see what all this means? It means you are correct in what you have stated about Silwood. Ucelli has not made a confession—that is, a direct confession—but his conduct can bear no other interpretation."

"Yes," assented Gilbert.

"Our next step must be to get the grave opened, and then the case will be complete. But first I will give Ucelli the opportunity of making a full confession."

The conversation between the Deputy-Minister and Gilbert had, up to this point, been in English. Turning to the Syndic, Signor Vinci asked him in his own language if he wished to make a statement.

"What is the use?" asked Ucelli. "I have done for myself—the game is up!"

"That being so, why not make a clean breast of everything?"

"What good would that do me? You will, besides, lay a charge against me of trying to murder you, and I shall be condemned to a life-sentence."

The Deputy thought for a few seconds.

"You are determined to say nothing?" he asked Ucelli.

"I will confess all—but only if you will promise me one thing on your honour," said Ucelli, who had been thinking too.

"I cannot make terms with you."

"In this instance you can."

"To what do you refer?"

"If you will waive the charge against me of trying to kill you, I will disclose everything. After all, I did not kill you; and if you will withhold the charge of attempt to murder, I will open my lips."

"You ask a great deal!" cried Vinci, but he did not refuse the man. As rapidly as he could, he told Gilbert of Ucelli's proposal, and said he was disposed to accept it.

"You may be surprised," he said to Gilbert, who was indeed astonished. "But I will tell you the reason. It is for your sake. If Ucelli makes a full confession, you will learn all you desire to know. Naturally, I have a desire that Ucelli should be punished for his attempt on my life, but I am willing to forego it. By so doing, and in this way obtaining the confession, I acknowledge and repay the obligation you have placed the Ministry of Justice under, for you have put into our hands the means of convicting Ucelli. I am sure this is what the Minister, His Excellency Signor Fava, would have me do."

"It is noble of you," said Gilbert, warmly, "to give up wreaking vengeance on your own account."

The Italian bowed and smiled pleasantly. He now addressed the Syndic, who had been watching the faces of the two others as they conversed, trying to gather from their expression what they were saying.

"I agree to your proposal," he said to Ucelli. "I will make no personal charge against you. You, on your part, will tell us all — absolutely all without equivocation."

"Yes, Excellency, absolutely all," replied the Syndic, a little colour of hope coming into his pallid cheeks.

"With your permission, I will speak in French, which Mr. Eversleigh understands, as does your Excellency, I doubt not."

"Let it be so," assented the Deputy. "Speak on!"

"I must go back some years, four or five," said Ucelli; "it was then that Silwood first came to Camajore. He made a stay of several weeks, in the course of which he became intimate with me; he often spent the evenings here, playing chess, a game of which I am fond. His holiday at an end, he went back to England. I did not see him again till last July. I wondered at his coming when cholera was everywhere, but he had an object in view—a scheme, which compelled him to run the risk."

Here the Syndic paused, as if to collect his thoughts.

"You saw him again?" prompted the Deputy.

"Alas, yes! He came to me and tempted me, and I succumbed. For a sum of money I agreed to assist him in his scheme. I knew I was doing a criminal act, but the bribe he offered me quieted all my scruples," Ucelli resumed. "I am a poor man, and I fell!"

"How much did he offer you?" demanded Vinci.

"It was fifty thousand liras," replied Ucelli. "Imagine, Excellency, the temptation to a poor man like myself!"

"Fifty thousand liras!" exclaimed the Deputy. "It is a large sum of money."

"Fifty thousand liras," thought Gilbert; "how much is that in English money?" A mental calculation showed him that it was nearly two thousand pounds. Where, he wondered, had Silwood got such a sum? But Ucelli was speaking.

"Yes, he offered me fifty thousand liras," repeated the Syndic, "and I swallowed the bait—like a fool. But I did not consent all at once. I knew the proceeding he proposed was dangerous in the extreme; but he allayed my fears by declaring it was impossible that it should ever be found out."

The Syndic stopped, overcome with self-pity.

"Well," cried Vinci; "what next?"

"His proposal was that I should have him in my house here, and soon after he was to pretend to be ill of cholera. After a short interval it was to be given out that he had died, while I was to have an imaginary body buried. There were so many deaths here at the time, and consequently so much confusion, that there was no difficulty in carrying out his plan."

"So you were right," said the Deputy to Gilbert.

"I issued a false certificate, and at Silwood's dictation penned the letter sent to Mr. Eversleigh's father," went on the Syndic, now bent on leaving nothing untold. "And it was he who arranged I should have in my possession the letters, money, clothes, and other articles which belonged to him."

"To give colour to the fiction of Silwood's death?" asked the Deputy.

"Precisely. I thought we had foreseen everything, and that discovery was impossible. Alas! but we are blind fools! I hoped, when inquiries came, I should be able to satisfy them easily. The two men who came to make inquiries before Mr. Eversleigh, I had no difficulty with."

It was Gilbert's turn to be amazed.

"What?" he cried. "Two men before me! What do you mean?"

"Ah, you did not know of them?" said the Syndic. "One was a detective of the English police, the other was a journalist, but they went empty away."

"Do you know their names?"

"Am I likely to forget anything or anybody connected with this affair?" asked Ucelli. "No; the name of the detective was Brydges, of Scotland Yard; that of the other was Westgate, a man on the staff of a London journal, the *Morning Call*."

The names conveyed no meaning to Gilbert, but he was filled with wonder. Thinking it over later, he saw it must have been suspected by others that Silwood was not dead, and he guessed these inquiries had been made in connection with the finding of Thornton's body in Silwood's rooms in Lincoln's Inn. The knowledge that the detective and the journalist had been at Camajore, however, gave him a bad turn; he was afraid to think what might have happened to his father if either of them had stumbled on the truth.

"I know neither of them," said Gilbert to the Syndic.

"They got nothing from me," resumed Ucelli. "I felicitated myself on getting rid of them without trouble. And then you came, Mr. Eversleigh, and I imagined you were as satisfied as they had been. I was a blind fool, a blind fool!"

"You see I was sure Silwood was not dead," remarked Gilbert.

"Do you know where he is?" eagerly inquired the Syndic.

"No, I don't; I hoped you would know."

The Syndic shook his head.

Signor Vinci darted an angry look at him.

"I don't know," persisted Ucelli, seeing the look.

"What occurred after the so-called death of Silwood?" asked the Deputy. "How did he get out of the country? It's plain he did not go as Silwood. If he had plenty of money, as I suppose his giving you fifty thousand liras shows, he would be able to procure disguises, have his own carriage, and journey as he liked."

"Mr. Silwood," replied Ucelli, "is undoubtedly a very rich man, as you suggest. He had an abundance of money."

Gilbert startled the other two men by suddenly rising from his chair with a vehement ejaculation.

"Silwood a rich man?" he cried.

"Beyond question, a very rich man."

Here was a new idea to Gilbert—new with a vengeance! Silwood rich!

Then what about Silwood's alleged losses on the Stock Exchange? he asked himself. Were they fictitious too? Or—what?

"Silwood is rich," continued the Syndic, "but it took very little money to get him out of the country, as it happened. His scheme had taken account of that, and he brought with him a disguise—a disguise as complete as any I ever saw; no one could have recognized him in it. By taking off his wig, putting on a moustache, staining his face and hands, and touching up his cheeks with some paint, he became another man altogether. Then he had clothes with him—such clothes, he told me, as any British workman might wear—and these he wore. The disguise was perfect, and must have been carefully studied. In the night I guided him out of Camajore, and set him on the way

to Lucca, which he reached; thence he went on to Genoa, where he took ship for England. But he was delayed at Genoa—there was an accident; how it came about is not known, but he was stabbed in the street."

"Stabbed in the street!" exclaimed Gilbert, on whom the full light was now breaking.

"Yes; he telegraphed for me to go to him, and I went. He said that to prosecute the man who had stabbed him would be fatal, and I arranged there should be no prosecution. Besides, his wound was not serious; he had merely to lie quiet for some days."

"Under what name did Silwood go when he was thus disguised?" asked Gilbert, though he knew what the reply would be.

"James Russell," said the Syndic.

CHAPTER XXXIV

"James Russell! I thought so," said Gilbert, tingling with excitement.

"Is this of importance to you?" the Deputy asked Gilbert.

"Of the utmost importance."

The Deputy smiled, and showed he was well pleased; but he asked no more questions, save one only.

"Is there anything else about which you wish to interrogate Ucelli?" he inquired.

"Yes. I should like to know if he is aware where Silwood, *alias* Russell, went to in England?"

"London," said the Syndic; "but he intended going to America eventually."

"That is all, I think, at present," said Gilbert to Signor Vinci.

"Should some other point occur to you later," suggested the Deputy, "you will have an opportunity of putting it to him in Rome, whither we must proceed with all speed."

"I had thought of setting out for London at once," said Gilbert. "The information I have obtained should be acted on without delay. Besides, my father is very ill."

"If you could spare one day! You are a witness to the confession of Ucelli, and I desire you to make a

deposition with respect to it before the Minister of Justice himself."

"I certainly owe you as much as that," acquiesced Gilbert.

Thereafter, the Deputy, leaving the bound man in Gilbert's charge, went out of the Syndic's house, to return in a short time with a couple of civil officers, who took Ucelli to prison. The Deputy now informed Gilbert that he had given orders to open up the reputed grave of Silwood, and late that evening they heard a coffin had been taken up and found to be filled with stones.

Next day the Deputy and Gilbert were in Rome, recounting to the Minister of Justice what had taken place. A deposition was drawn up and signed by Gilbert; at the same time, he acknowledged very heartily his great obligations to the Minister and the Deputy.

"Not at all," said the Minister; "you have really conferred a great favour on us. But there is one thing I should like to ask you, if it is not indiscreet."

"And that is, signor?"

"We know why Ucelli entered into this conspiracy with Silwood; it was because of the fifty thousand liras Silwood gave him. But we do not know what induced or compelled Silwood to act as he did. I can see, of course, that in all probability he is a great criminal. For that matter, the conspiracy itself was a crime of the gravest character. If I could arrest this Silwood, he would receive a heavy sentence, you may be sure."

While his superior was speaking, the Deputy had a little smile on his grim face. He had wished to ask Gilbert the question now put to him by the Minister,

but, feeling tolerably certain of the truth, had refrained. Still, he listened eagerly to Gilbert's reply.

"Silwood is an absconder and a forger," said Gilbert. "To conceal his crimes, to cover up his tracks, he planned and carried out, with Ucelli's help, this infamous plot. There, that is all."

"And more than enough!" exclaimed the Minister. "You will, as soon as you return to England, proceed to have this man hunted down?"

"It will be the one object of my life until it is accomplished," said Gilbert, emphatically.

On his way back to London, Gilbert pondered what he should next do, and reflected on the occurrences of the last two or three days. The whole scheme of Silwood was now tolerably plain. To begin with, it was evident Silwood had long been leading a double life. There were the wife and child and the house at Stepney on the one hand; and, on the other, the private chambers in Lincoln's Inn. In the latter he was Cooper Silwood, solicitor; in Stepney he was James Russell, workman. And now Gilbert recalled very vividly the story told by the waster, the poor human wreck who spoke like a gentleman, the story of the workman seen issuing in the dead of night from the iron gate of the Stone Buildings' end of Chancery Lane.

"Of course, it was Silwood," argued Gilbert; "it must have been he. The waster said the workman was flurried, went away hurriedly, but returned in half an hour. What does that mean, taken in connection with the fact that next morning Silwood left London? It must have been no light thing which made *him* flurried. He intended going to Stepney, started, and then changed his mind. Not like *him* either, to change

his mind in that way. Something must have happened."

Then the thought came leaping into his mind which explained everything.

"It must have been because Morris Thornton was lying dead in Silwood's room—that accounts for his agitation and indecision."

After that he asked himself the inevitable question—

"Had Silwood said or done anything to cause such a shock to Thornton as killed him? If so, what?"

But this was a question he could not answer now. The key to the mystery lay with Silwood, and it was possible, even probable, he had made good his escape to America, if it was to America he was gone. America was a wide word, Gilbert mused, but the arm of Justice was long. Yet the search all over America—was that not like looking for a needle in a haystack? And the time which would almost certainly be occupied in the quest—what might not happen in the interim?

With these questions, and such as these, Gilbert was distracted during his journey, and the news which met him on his arrival in London made his heart heavy as lead.

His brother Ernest was at the station when his train steamed in. Gilbert observed he looked pale and sad.

"How is father?" were Gilbert's first words.

"Oh, it is terrible!" exclaimed Ernest.

"Is he worse?"

"Yes, he is worse. He will never be himself again, I fear. He is out of his mind."

"Out of his mind!" cried Gilbert, but in his heart he was saying it was no wonder that his father had

become insane, considering all he had borne during the past two months.

"Isn't it dreadful?"

"It may be only temporary," Gilbert suggested.

"The doctors who have seen him do not give us much hope."

"You have had specialists called in?"

"Certainly."

"What form does his trouble take?"

"He is not at all violent; indeed, he is gentleness itself. But his memory seems a blank, and he does not speak except to say one sentence, and it breaks one's heart to hear him say it."

"What does he say?'

"He asks, 'What o'clock is it?' but he does not know what he says. If you tell him the time, he does not comprehend you. That was how mother found his trouble out. One night he had a sort of fit in bed; when it passed he asked, 'What o'clock is it?' and mother told him. He asked again, 'What o'clock is it?' and mother again told him. But he immediately inquired once more, 'What o'clock is it?' and then she began to surmise something was very wrong with him."

"Poor mother!" exclaimed Gilbert. "How is she?"

"She is a brave woman, and is bearing up wonderfully. Well, she waited till morning, and then sent me for a doctor, who, after seeing father, said his brain was affected. I got the best specialists to see him, and they declared his mind had given way, so far as they could judge, from overstrain. It seems that the gentle kind of melancholy madness which afflicts him is incurable. Isn't it sad?"

"Very sad; but doctors are sometimes wrong, and we must hope for the best. Is he at Ivydene?"

"Yes; with a nurse. The doctors thought it was prudent to have a nurse, though, really, he does not require one. He is just like a child. I have not allowed news of his trouble to get about."

The brothers now got into a hansom, and drove to Gilbert's chambers in the Temple. Gilbert could see that Ernest had more to tell him, and half guessed what it was. In the circumstances, too, Gilbert thought Ernest must now be told the true position of the firm of Eversleigh, Silwood and Eversleigh.

"When your letter to father came," continued Ernest, "he was already in the condition he now is, so I opened and read it. As I wired you, I was completely bewildered by what you wrote, but tried to puzzle out your meaning. Without the key, however, I could not succeed."

"I'll disclose everything to you, Ernie," said Gilbert.

"And, Gilbert, there is something more. The doctors said father's trouble came from his brain having been overstrained. I believe they are right, and I'll tell you why. I had to make out the position of our firm with respect to the securities of one of our clients, Mr. Archibald Johnstone, and, so far as I can see, we have not got these securities; at any rate, I cannot lay my hands on them anywhere in the office. I went to Archer Martin, the accountant, hoping he might throw some light on the subject; but he said I had better ask you, as you would know. Gilbert, Gilbert, I don't know what to think, but it looks to me as if there's something very serious in this business."

"Yes, Ernie, there is," said Gilbert; "it is as

serious as it can be. It is so serious that I can almost feel glad father is not in his right mind."

"Gilbert!"

"It is true. Now let me tell you all I know. The main thing is that Cooper Silwood robbed the firm of a large sum of money. He absconded to Camajore, in Italy, where, in collusion with the Syndic of the place he gave out that he was dead."

Ernest stared at his brother wildly.

"What are you saying?" he cried. "Silwood robbed the firm! absconded to Italy! pretended he was dead!"

"Exactly. But I must begin at the beginning, and tell you the whole story in detail."

When he had heard it all, Ernest was thunderstruck.

"This Silwood must be a devil!" he cried.

"Ay, a devil in cleverness, in ingenuity, in resource, in cunning, and we have to encounter and defeat these qualities in him. He must be found."

"The police?"

"Can we afford to let them know our affairs?"

"No; I suppose not. Would you employ private detectives?"

"Yes; there are very excellent private detective agencies in America, such as Pinkerton's. As I have already told you, I have a man in England following up the trail of Silwood, whom he knows only as James Russell. He may have something to report."

There were several letters lying on Gilbert's table. Owing to the urgency of his talk with Ernest, he had not looked at them; he now did so, hoping that one of them was from the detective, and this hope proved well-founded.

The detective wrote that he had discovered in the list

of steerage passengers, kept by one of the Liverpool shipping firms, an entry of "James Russell, wife, and child." From inquiries he had made, he had learned that the child was a cripple; this fact, together with the name, James Russell, and the numbers in the party, agreed with what he had been told of the Russells who had lived in No. 99, Douglas Street, Stepney, so that he had very little doubt that he was on the right trail. He went on to state that the Russells had sailed for New York and had arrived there, as he had ascertained from his correspondent in that city. On landing, Russell had declared he was an immigrant, and having been informed that by American law it was necessary to show he was possessed of a certain stipulated sum of money, had produced it, and was allowed to enter the country. Russell had also declared his intention to go West, mentioning St. Paul in the State of Minnesota as his probable destination. These facts, the detective added, were communicated to him by cable, and he asked for further instructions.

Gilbert handed the letter to Ernest, remarking here was some good news.

"Oh, if we can only catch Silwood soon!" cried Ernest, after perusing the letter.

CHAPTER XXXV

"To catch Silwood! Yes, that is the business we must press to a conclusion; everything must give way to it!" said Gilbert, energetically. "I shall wire the detective to cable his American correspondent to continue his search."

Then Gilbert was silent for a while, meditating deeply.

"Bennet's trial," he said at length, "is fixed for the middle of November, is it not, Ernie?"

"Yes, November 15th, at York. North Eastern Circuit; Judge, Warrender," replied Ernest, quickly.

"That would give me six weeks," remarked Gilbert, thoughtfully.

"What! Do you intend going to the United States after Silwood? Six weeks is rather a short period."

"Of course it is, but it might be enough. I believe I ought to go, and I have a presentiment I shall succeed. St. Paul is a long way off, though."

Gilbert now consulted an atlas.

"I see," said he, "St. Paul is just about half-way across the American continent. Still, I should be able to reach it in ten days. Say twenty days for going and returning, that leaves twenty and odd days for hunting the man down. Yes, I'll go. Will you

arrange about a steamer, while I run across to Surbiton to see father, mother, and Helen?"

"Yes. But are you not counting too much on Silwood's being at St. Paul? You don't really know he is there at all."

"I trust I'm not. My opinion is that Silwood was sure of the working of his scheme; so much so, he took no trouble to cover up his movements. When he said he was going to St. Paul, I imagine he stated the truth. Still, I may be wrong. But I shall soon know."

"You think he was so confident he had obliterated the past, so to speak, that he took no further precautions?"

"That's just my idea. Anyhow, I wish you would inquire about steamers, and secure a berth for me on the first one that goes out. Meanwhile I'll go over to Ivydene."

"All right," said Ernest, and went across to the office in Lincoln's Inn. There he rang up the shipping companies on the telephone, and finally arranged for a passage on the *St. Louis*, which was leaving Southampton next morning.

He remembered it was the *St. Louis* by which Morris Thornton had returned to England, and it struck him as of good augury that his brother should sail on it in pursuit of Silwood, who had so marred the fortunes of Thornton and them all.

The brothers met again late in the afternoon, and Ernest told Gilbert that he had taken a berth for him in this vessel, and, as it sailed on the morrow about noon, he must at once make preparations for leaving.

"I am very glad that I start so soon," remarked

Gilbert. "I feel as if I must be moving and doing something towards getting on Silwood's track. When I saw poor father, I longed with all my soul to slay this man, this villain, who has wrought us such terrible wrong, such irremediable mischief. I know now how a murderer must feel—though to kill such a miscreant as Silwood would not be murder; it would be like killing some poisonous reptile."

"I understand your feelings," said Ernest; "but if you meet him you must not give way to your anger, just though it is. You must not forget that it is the money——"

"You may be sure I won't forget it," interrupted Gilbert. "But it made my blood fairly boil when I saw father, and heard his parrot-like cry of 'What o'clock is it?' He did not know me at all; he does not even know mother. It's frightfully sad for her, poor dear. And we owe this whole trouble to that devil, Silwood! It makes me savage to think of it!"

"Yes, it's hard to bear. Now, is there anything more I can do for you? Any matter to attend to?"

"You might see the detective, and tell him I have gone to New York, where I shall look up his correspondent."

"He had better cable across that you are going—that will prepare the way for you."

"Quite right," agreed Gilbert. "Are you coming to see me off to-morrow morning?"

"From Waterloo? Yes. Did you say anything to mother about going to America?"

"Yes, I told her of it. She was surprised; but I assured her I had no option, but hoped to bring back good news."

"Pray Heaven you may!"

"Has anything further been done in the case of Bennet?" asked Gilbert, after a minute's silence.

"I went to York, and, along with the local solicitor, had a conversation with Bennet, but to no purpose. I never saw such an impracticable man. He seemed all the time in a state of suppressed rage and fury; indeed, they hardly were suppressed. He is more like a caged tiger than a man."

"Does he know about father's condition?"

"No. I have kept it quiet, as I told you before. But I fear we cannot keep it hid very long; it is bound to get out."

"Are you to see Bennet again soon?"

"I must, and he is pretty sure to ask why father has not come instead of me. He asked me that last time, and he was very rude when I told him father was too ill to go to York. I'll have to tell him the truth sooner or later. What do you think?"

"I advise telling him the truth," said Gilbert. "Now, Ernie, there's one thing I wish to ask you, and then I will go on with my packing. I did not like to ask mother. Has she or Helen or any one heard how Miss Thornton is?"

"All that I can tell you," replied Ernest, "is, I was told she had been to see Bennet in prison. Neither mother nor Helen has heard from or of her, I feel quite sure."

Gilbert sighed heavily, but said nothing.

Next day he was on board the *St. Louis*, and arrived, a week later, at New York. On the pier he was met by the detective's correspondent, a slim, sharp-faced man, called Matthews, who introduced himself.

"I have news for you, Mr. Eversleigh," said Matthews, after they had exchanged a few words.

"Good news, I hope?" asked Gilbert.

"I reckon it is pretty good," was the reply. "James Russell, the man you want, is living in St. Paul with his wife and child. His house is in a poor quarter of the city, and he don't seem well off. He goes about quite openly, too, as if he had nothing to fear—I mean he don't try and hide himself. I have an agent in St. Paul, and what I've told you is what he wired me; you can depend on it."

"This is indeed good news," said Gilbert, eagerly. "Now I must go on to St. Paul. How long will it take me to get there?"

"Two days, more or less. You travel to Chicago first, and then on to St. Paul. So you will go straight there? Have you any acquaintances or friends in St. Paul?"

"I know no one there."

"Would you like a letter to my agent? He's as bright as a new dollar, and as sharp as a needle."

"Much obliged to you; by all means give me a note to him. And now tell me about the trains, please; I am quite a stranger here."

"D'you wish to leave to-day?"

"I hate to think of losing a minute needlessly," said Gilbert, earnestly. "The matter is of the greatest importance."

"So I guessed," observed Matthews. "I'll do the best I can for you."

And he did. He made everything easy for Gilbert, so that the latter had no difficulty in reaching St. Paul well within two days after his arrival in New York.

As he had calculated, he was in St. Paul ten days after leaving London. Putting up at the Merchant's Hotel, he at once tried to get into communication with Hankey, Matthew's agent, on the telephone, but was disappointed. From a directory he ascertained where Hankey's office was, and learning from the hotel clerk that it was only a few blocks away, and not difficult to find, he set out for it. But he did not reach it without having to ask his way several times from people he met in the streets.

Stopping at the junction of two streets, and uncertain whether to go straight ahead or turn off, Gilbert consulted a policeman standing at the corner. As he spoke, the sound of his voice, or rather his accent, attracted the attention of a man who was passing by. Gilbert had his back to this pedestrian, so that he did not see him.

The pedestrian paused to make certain that he did recognize Gilbert's voice; besides, he recognized Gilbert's figure. Then he walked on slowly, and watched Gilbert's movements from a distance, taking care to keep himself unobserved.

The pedestrian was Cooper Silwood, *alias* James Russell, but it was in the latter character he now appeared.

"What is he doing here?" Silwood asked himself. "Is it a mere accident, or has he discovered something? I must follow him and see where he goes—that may afford an indication of his business here."

And as he shadowed Gilbert from a safe distance, and pondered the reason for his being in St. Paul, his keen intelligence told him more and more insistently that Gilbert's visit to St. Paul was concerned with him.

Any doubt he had was dissipated when he saw Gilbert enter the building in which were situated the offices of 'Hankey's Private Detective Agency."

"How much does he know?" wondered Silwood. "How does he know it? What mistake have I made? what loophole left? I believed myself absolutely safe; but now. . . . Well, St. Paul is no place any longer for me. I must leave it at once, and go on to Winnipeg, and hide myself somewhere on the prairies of the North-West."

After a very short time, Gilbert reappeared and retraced his steps to the Merchant's Hotel, whither Silwood, still at a safe distance, followed him.

"This is where he is stopping," thought Silwood, as he observed Gilbert pass into the hotel.

Then Silwood walked rapidly away.

Gilbert had met with a second disappointment. On calling at Hankey's Agency, he had been told Hankey himself had that morning been summoned on urgent business to Minneapolis, and would not return till the evening, when he would make a point of coming round to the Merchant's. There was therefore nothing for it but to wait.

Late in the evening Hankey came.

"I am sorry I am so late, but I could not help it!" he exclaimed. "I have come straight to you from Minneapolis, without going to my office first, as I knew you must be anxious to see me. Sorry I could not come sooner, but it was an important case—defaulting bank president and cashier."

Gilbert nodded that he quite understood.

"About James Russell," continued Hankey. "I can put my hand on him at any time; he is kept under

constant observation, though he has no idea of it. Yet it hardly seems necessary, for he walks about quite openly in the streets, sometimes alone, sometimes with his wife. They have a lame, crippled child, which they have taken out once or twice."

"Is James Russell anything like this?" asked Gilbert, handing Hankey a photograph of Silwood.

"About the same height, perhaps, but otherwise quite different."

"Yet it is the same man," said Gilbert.

"If so—and I don't doubt your word—what a splendid disguise he has assumed! Case of absconding?" asked Hankey. "Do you wish him arrested?"

"By-and-by; but first I must try to get him to disgorge. He has absconded with a large sum of money."

"Much?"

"Between three and four hundred thousand pounds."

"Nearly two million dollars!" exclaimed Hankey. "Mr. James Russell must be a pretty smart man. Two million! I confess to a certain admiration for a man who can rake in as big a pot as that. Well, I should say it would be very difficult to make a man of that calibre disgorge. How do you intend doing it?"

"I thought you might be able to suggest some plan."

"Well, I reckon that is possible. First thing is to get hold of Russell—and it'll have to be a tight hold, you bet."

"Of course. I admit I don't see what to do; but it seems to me I remember reading of a case the Pinkertons had, in which they had the criminal seized—it was also a case of embezzlement—and kept in a room till he disgorged. They did not put him into prison; they

kept him a prisoner in a room in a house of their own."

"I guess something of the kind has happened," remarked Hankey; "but it sounds rather like a bit out of a dime novel. You suggest I should attempt the same game with James Russell, is that it?"

"It is just an idea; I don't say you should act upon it. Is there any plan in your mind?"

"Not at the moment. I'll sleep on it, and come round in the morning."

"Very well. But of course you understand I wish the business concluded as speedily as possible."

"Quite so. I'll be here early in the morning."

Gilbert could not get to sleep easily that night. He was possessed by a feeling of intense excitement; but at last he fell into a restless slumber. It seemed to him that he had just closed his eyes when he was awakened by a loud knocking at his door.

"What is it?" he cried.

"It's Hankey. I must see you at once. Most urgent!"

Gilbert sprang out of bed instantly, and admitted the detective.

CHAPTER XXXVI

"Sorry to disturb you so unceremoniously," said Hankey, "but it is necessary. I bring you unexpected news of supreme moment. Please dress, and while you are dressing I will tell you of a very startling development in the Russell affair."

"Is the news good or bad?"

"Good, I think; but time alone will disclose that. But please dress as quickly as you can, for you will have to go on a journey immediately. I have taken the liberty of ordering something for you to eat, and it should be here in a minute or two. You have just half an hour in which to catch the train you must travel by."

"What is the news?" asked Gilbert, going on dressing all the while.

"Well, last night, after I left you, I went to my office, late as it was, and I found one of my subordinates waiting for me. It was the man whose duty it was to shadow Russell. He reported that he had kept sight of him until he went into his own house. My man then hung about, and after some time, a conveyance drove up, into which presently Russell, his wife and child got. He followed them to the railway depôt, and finally saw them depart in the Northern Pacific Express for Winnipeg."

"Gone!" exclaimed Gilbert; "and with a start of

half-a-day! And James Russell leaves St. Paul the very day I arrive. That's curious. Had he got warning? But how?"

"Perhaps he saw you in the streets yesterday—you were about a good deal, were you not?"

"Yes; that may be it."

"It does not matter much, anyhow; the fact remains that he went away last night."

"And I must go after him at once. That's what you mean?"

"That's part of it; but there is more to tell you, much more. For, this morning, about forty minutes ago—oh, I lost no time, you will perceive—one of my men who has to be on duty all night at my office, came to my house and woke me up. He was aware Russell was on board the Northern Pacific Express going to Winnipeg last night, and he had come hot-foot to show me an early edition of the *Pioneer Press*—that's our leading paper—in which there is a long account of a dreadful accident to this very express. It had collided with a freight train, both trains being wrecked and smashed to pieces. Many of the passengers have been killed, and most of the survivors are badly injured."

"And Russell?" Gilbert inquired breathlessly.

"He is not in the list of the dead; his name appears amongst those whose injuries are probably fatal. This is why I am hurrying you up. If you wish to see him alive, you must catch the first train. Now, do you see? Was not my knocking you up in this way justified?"

"Yes, indeed. I am grateful to you for your zeal. How far up the line was the accident?"

"A few miles south of Glyndon. You can be there in a comparatively short time."

"I think I should like you to come with me," said Gilbert, after a brief silence; "that is, if you are disengaged."

"I can manage to come all right, and I should like to know the end; though it's possible the man may recover. On the other hand, if he knows he is certain to die, there's just a chance he may be willing to own up and make restitution, if that's in his power."

"A death-bed confession! Now, I should say," remarked Gilbert, "Russell is the last man on earth to make one."

But now there appeared a waiter with a tray on which was some breakfast, and the conversation stopped.

Ten minutes later, Gilbert and Hankey were speeding northwards on the Northern Pacific to the scene of the collision, where they arrived in due course. On the way up, every one was talking of the appalling disaster. Many in the train were relatives of the victims, and the whole atmosphere was charged with grief and sorrow. Gilbert Eversleigh was too young and too sensitive not to sympathize with and share these feelings. They made such an impression on him that the vengeance he cherished, and the hatred he felt for Silwood were decidedly modified, though he was scarcely aware of it himself.

The express stopped some fifty yards away from the spot where the collision had taken place. When Gilbert and the detective alighted, they saw an enormous crowd had already gathered together, large numbers having flocked in from the surrounding country. For the most part, it was a quiet and silent crowd. The

Shadow of Death lay heavy upon it; here and there, however, were little groups weeping and sobbing and wringing their hands. In the midst of one stood a woman, suddenly crazed, who alternately screamed and laughed.

The scene was such, the circumstances were such, that they could not fail to make an ineffaceable impression on Gilbert's mind.

It was an unparalleled scene of destruction.

In the centre was the wreck of the two trains lying on the torn and twisted rails. The engines were piled high in the middle, with their colossal frames seamed, cracked, broken, burnt, and bent into queer shapes. Some of the coaches and carriages of the ill-fated express had been smashed into matchwood, others lay about in large pieces and dislocated sections, and the whole formed a confusion of wood, glass, and other materials, rendered more terrible from the fact that fire had swept its destroying torch over a large part of it.

And it was whispered there were bodies, or what had once been bodies, lying somewhere in that chaos!

Gangs of railroad men were struggling to bring some sort of order into it, but their progress was necessarily slow. Now and again a charred and blackened object, which had lost all semblance to anything human, was dug up and carried away.

On one side of the wreck two large tents had been erected: one was used as a mortuary, to which the dead were carried; the other served as a hospital for the injured and wounded, where they were tended by doctors from the vicinity, who had volunteered their services.

It was to the hospital tent that Gilbert and Hankey directed their steps, but they experienced considerable difficulty in gaining admission. However, at last they were allowed in, and a doctor, of whom they inquired, told them James Russell was still alive, was indeed likely to live for two days or perhaps longer, but that the nature of the injuries he had received made his recovery impossible. He was quite conscious, and knew he was dying.

"He would be glad to see some one he knows," added the doctor.

"How are his wife and child?"

"Both are injured, but not seriously. I have not told them of Russell's condition."

"Is there any objection, doctor," asked Gilbert, "to my speaking to him at once?"

"None at all, I think," replied the physician, and he led them to the pallet on which lay Russell, his head and shoulders swathed in bandages, and his face, where visible, extraordinarily pinched and white. The false moustache which he had worn as part of his disguise was gone, the paint had been washed from his cheeks, and Gilbert had no difficulty whatever in identifying Cooper Silwood in "James Russell."

"It is he," he whispered to Hankey.

Hankey peered into the face.

"He is now more like that photograph you showed me," said Hankey beneath his breath to Gilbert.

Gilbert went and stood over Silwood, and looked him in the eyes. The dying man evinced no surprise at seeing him, but returned Gilbert's gaze calmly. He was the first to speak.

"Gilbert Eversleigh," he said in a queer voice, that

had no weakness in it. "I expected you to come, but not so soon. How is it you are here so quickly? The telegram I sent by the doctor to you at the Merchants' Hotel was despatched only two hours ago."

"You sent me a telegram!" said Gilbert, astonished, but not so much so as not to note Silwood knew he had been stopping at the Merchants'. "I have not received it. The reason I am here is, I was aware you were on board the express, and hearing of the accident, I came at once on the chance of speaking to you."

"You knew I was on the express?"

"Yes; your movements yesterday were observed."

"I see," said Silwood, thoughtfully. Then he added, "Well, it does not signify now—nothing signifies any more to me!"

Silwood pronounced these words in a firm voice, though strongly tinged with regret. Gilbert stood by in silence, many feelings working within him.

"Nothing matters any more to me personally," continued Silwood; "but there are others of whom I must think, for they are dear to me. It was because of them, it was for their sakes, that I sent you the telegram. I asked the doctor to tell me the truth, the whole truth, about my state; and when he told me that I should not last more than two or three days, I had to consider the best course to take. What helped me to make up my mind was the certainty you had made some discovery—otherwise, I reasoned, you would not have been in St. Paul yesterday. Had this accident not occurred, and if I had been alone, I should have succeeded in baffling you; even hampered by my wife and the boy, I believe I could have managed to escape pursuit. But now I am dying, and my wife and child

would soon have been hunted down when left to themselves. Therefore I resolved to ask you to come to me."

Silwood paused, his breath coming a little more quickly than before.

"But why?" asked Gilbert.

"I wished to make a bargain with you."

"To make a bargain!"

"Yes. I thought of offering to tell you the whole truth if you would consent to make provision for my wife and child. She is an uneducated woman, and the boy is a cripple. They are two helpless creatures, and they are absolutely innocent; they do not even know my real name. They believe I am——"

"James Russell!"

"Yes! You know that! That is what I thought, else you would not have been in St. Paul. Will you consent to make some provision for them, if I declare everything without concealment or reserve? I do not know how much you do know?" he added inquiringly.

"I know a good deal, but not all. I know you did not lose the money on the Stock Exchange, as you told my father, but that you—appropriated it to your own use, and still have it, I imagine. Is it not so?"

"Yes. That money shall be restored to you in trust for your father and the firm, if you will accede to my suggestion about my wife and child. What more do you know?"

"I know you led a double life, and that you entered into a conspiracy with Ucelli, the Syndic of Camajore. But I do not know what passed between you and Morris Thornton the night he died."

"I will tell you the whole story," said Silwood, "if

you will agree to see my wife and child suitably provided for."

"And if I refuse?"

"Refuse! You will not refuse. Consider! In forty-eight or fifty hours I shall be dead. Nothing can alter that. I shall be where the hand of the law cannot touch me. What can you do against a dead man? Personal vengeance on me is impossible. On the other hand, if you will do what I wish, then I will tell you where the money is, so that you will have no difficulty in obtaining it. You have much to gain and nothing to lose by falling in with my desire."

"But I shall be able to get at the money in any case."

"No, that you never shall unless you get my help."

Gilbert thought for a while. The coolness of Silwood's proposition startled him; yet there was much to recommend it.

"Let me consider for a few moments what you have said," he remarked to Silwood; "and I will tell you my decision."

CHAPTER XXXVII

Beckoning to Hankey, the detective, to follow him, Gilbert went from the hospital tent into the open air to consider quietly what he should do. He was not sorry to get out of the atmosphere of the tent, which reeked with iodoform; where also the sight of so many poor stricken and agonized wretches harrowed his feelings.

Just outside the tent, he encountered the doctor who had conducted him to the bedside of Cooper Silwood, *alias* James Russell.

"Did you find him quite sensible, as I said?" asked the doctor.

"Extraordinarily so," replied Gilbert. "His mind is perfectly clear, even his voice shows no weakness. One would scarcely think he is dying."

"And yet nothing can save him. For two or three hours longer he will remain in much the same condition; thereafter a state of collapse must supervene, which will end in death—during that period he will become unconscious, and remain so to the last."

"Of course, you must know," said Gilbert; "but from the strong, firm voice he speaks in, one would imagine he is not in this desperate case."

"It is so, however. The principal mischief is internal, and does not admit of cure."

Then the doctor hurried into the tent. What he had said had given fresh point to those words of Silwood's—"You can do nothing against a dead man. Personal vengeance upon me is impossible." The hand of Heaven, Gilbert reflected, already lay heavy on the man.

Then he debated the offer made by Silwood. From the first he had inclined to accept it. What he had witnessed of the calamity had softened his heart; and to find Silwood cared for his wife and child in the way he evidently did, was a discovery of a side, entirely unsuspected, of this man's nature, which somehow appealed to Gilbert. These were sentimental influences, but became powerful reasons when added to the practical argument, the immediate recovery of the stolen money. Gilbert did not altogether believe that the money, or a large part of it, at any rate, could not be recovered without Silwood's help, but it might be a long and tedious business, involving, likely enough, considerable litigation, expense, and delay. Then there was the secret of Morris Thornton's death to be cleared up—a thing which Silwood alone could do.

Gilbert quickly made up his mind that the best policy was to accept Silwood's offer. Rapidly outlining the main facts to Hankey, who listened with an ever-increasing wonder, Gilbert desired him to accompany him into the tent to act as witness to the statement of Silwood.

"Well?" asked Silwood, as Gilbert bent over him.

"I agree. You will hold nothing back?"

"I am glad, for the sake of my wife and our child," said Silwood. "No, nothing shall be held back. But who is this man?" he asked, his eyes glancing at Hankey.

"I asked him to come as a witness."

"Very well; he'll be a witness to what you promise for my wife and child, as well as of what I tell you. So be it. What do you promise for them?"

"What do you wish me to promise exactly?"

"That you pay her three pounds a week for life, and that, should she die before the child, you will continue the payment to him for his life."

"Yes, I promise that, contingent——"

"Certainly, you mean contingent on your receiving the money? That is understood. Now, ask one of the doctors to come here?"

One of the doctors was called up.

"Doctor," said Silwood, "will you go and ask my wife, Mrs. James Russell, who is lying in the tent somewhere, to give you the key she has on the ribbon round her neck? Say that I sent you; give her my love, and tell her I am comfortable."

There were tears in Silwood's eyes as he spoke the last words. Seeing them, Gilbert marvelled at the strange intricacies of the human soul, but held his peace.

"Your wife sends her love to you," said the doctor, on his return, "and bids you not fret about her. Here is the key."

"Thank you, doctor. Give the key to this gentleman here," and Silwood with his eyes indicated that it should be given to Gilbert. This done, the doctor retired.

"That key," Silwood resumed, "is the key of a compartment in the Minnesota Safety Deposit Vaults, in which you will find not only all the money, in the form of bank-notes, bonds payable to bearer, and other easily

negotiable securities, that I owe to the firm of Eversleigh, Silwood and Eversleigh, but a good deal more than I owe."

"Where are these Safety Deposit Vaults?" asked Gilbert.

"In St. Paul," whispered Hankey, bending towards him.

"Yes, in St. Paul," said Silwood, who had overheard.

"And all the money is there in bonds and so forth?" asked Gilbert.

"That and more, for I have made money. Always, always, all my life, have I longed to possess a great store of money; it was my passion—money, money, always money; always more money," said Silwood, with a passing gleam in his eyes; then a deep sigh escaped him. "You will find there is far more than enough to recoup the firm."

Gilbert listened in amazement, revolving what manner of man this was to have acted as he had done through all these silent years.

"And more than enough to pay that annuity to my wife and child," Silwood went on. "Now promise me once more that you will pay them what I have asked, and then I will tell you the whole story. Do you promise?"

"Yes, I promise," said Gilbert.

"Then my mind is at rest, so far as they are concerned. And all is well," said Silwood, as if he had never done anything wrong in his life. Then he began—

"I do not know quite when the idea came to me of making myself master of the clients' money, but, as I

told you, I ever burned to be rich. Your father was so easy-going and unsuspecting, and he trusted me so fully, that when the idea came it found quick lodgment in my thoughts. But what helped more than anything else, was that I was already leading a double life. I had married beneath me, as people would say; but the only moments of happiness I have had in my life connect themselves with my wife and child. It matters not how I met and came to marry her. No one of our class dreamed I was other than Cooper Silwood, solicitor, of Lincoln's Inn. But I was also James Russell at Stepney. I experienced no difficulty in being both; I had my disguise, and having also the keys of the two iron gates opening into Chancery Lane, at the top of Stone Buildings, I was able to let myself out or in at pleasure. To lead this double life was easy, I say; I even liked it. When the thought came to me of enriching myself at the expense of the clients, it occurred to me to make use of James Russell to assist Cooper Silwood. Do you understand?"

"Yes. You purposed to transfer the securities to yourself as James Russell? In fact, that is what you did do, at any rate in part."

"Yes; Cooper Silwood sold to James Russell," assented Silwood. "The plan worked well—worked well for years. Gradually I got possession of everything—save what was impossible for me to touch. And all that money and property I had converted into first-class bonds and shares payable to bearer, with one exception, a very important exception, when the letter came from Morris Thornton, telling us he was returning to England, and would make a formal examination of the securities we held of his. I was not prepared for

it; my hand was forced. I had not meant to disappear until I had completed a certain negotiation—the exception to which I have just referred. It was more than possible, I thought, that Thornton would come before that negotiation was complete, in which case I might be in great danger. The more I thought about it, the greater the danger seemed. It was this that drove me to tell your father of the position to which I, as Cooper Silwood, had brought the firm. Of course, I said nothing to him about James Russell."

"I don't quite follow you," said Gilbert. "Why did you tell my father at all?"

"Because I wished him, being so friendly with Thornton, to hold Morris off until that negotiation was complete. Do you not understand? Suppose Thornton had come before my plans were ripe and asked for that examination, I believed your father would have been able to have stood him off for some time—long enough for me to get that matter settled to my liking. Now, do you see?"

"Yes," said Gilbert, dryly, any pity he had felt for Silwood disappearing as he listened to this heartless statement. "What was this important negotiation of which you speak?"

"I had sold some acres of land to a contractor, who had paid a heavy price for them," said Silwood, now speaking with the indifference of a man who is telling a story that has no longer any interest for him; "but I had to be content with getting half the price in cash and half in the form of a bill. The total amount was thirty thousand pounds, the bill was for fifteen thousand, and when we heard from Thornton it still had some time to run. I did not discount the bill, but put it in

a chamber in that large japanned box you may remember seeing in my room."

"The secret chamber!" exclaimed Gilbert.

"You know of it?"

"Did you not go one night to New Square not long ago, and open it?"

"Yes; you know that! I went to get the bill—it was due next day."

"I see. Well, you left the secret chamber open, and that showed us you were not dead, and put us on your track."

Silwood's eyes flickered.

"The spring would not work," he said. "It had baffled me very nearly once or twice before, but that time it baffled me altogether. So! so! I understand now why you came to St. Paul—it was the secret chamber which gave me away, which has brought me here."

"Yes; I went to Italy," said Gilbert, "and Ucelli confessed the conspiracy you and he had entered into. He it was who told me that you and James Russell were one. James Russell was tracked to Liverpool, then to New York, and then to St. Paul."

"What a pity I did not leave that bill alone!" said Silwood, quite calmly. "But I could not think of leaving fifteen thousand pounds behind me. That," he added, "you will find with the rest."

"Did you cash the bill?"

"Certainly, as James Russell, to whom it was payable."

"How in the world," interjected Gilbert, "shall we be able to put all these matters right?"

"There will be plenty of money," said Silwood,

"for everybody. But let me get on with my story while I am able. I told you I put the bill for the fifteen thousand into the secret chamber. Of course I hoped Thornton would not come before it matured, or, if he did, that your father would find means to delay the investigation of his account. But your father on this point was firm; he said he would not deceive Thornton, though I pressed him more than once. When I saw I could not move him, I prepared to act alone. I gave out I was about to take a holiday—it was a holiday from which I had no intention to return—at least, not as Cooper Silwood. I meant to leave on a Saturday evening—I actually went on the Saturday morning . . . and it was because of Thornton."

"Of Morris Thornton?"

"It was past midnight," said Silwood, "and I was getting ready to go to Stepney, when I heard steps coming up the stairs towards my rooms in Stone Buildings; the steps stopped at my door; some one knocked. I had no wish to open the door, for I was in my disguise, so I paid no attention to the sound.

"'Whoever you are,' said a voice, 'I warn you to open the door, or I shall tell the porter to call the police. I saw you from Chancery Lane. Come, open at once!'

"I glanced at my window, the one looking into Chancery Lane. By some frightful carelessness I had neglected to pull down the blind, and thus it was possible enough for the man to have seen me. But what did he want, I wondered?

"'Open at once!' said the voice again; 'or it will be the worse for you.'

"I was in a fix, but my best course seemed to be to let the man in; so I asked him to wait a moment, saying I was only half dressed. I hastily donned my wig, tore off my false moustache, and put on my ordinary coat and waistcoat. Then I opened the door.

"'What is the matter?' I asked.

"The man walked right into the room without speaking, and looked all round it, as if he was searching for some one. Then I saw who it was. It was Morris Thornton!

"'What is the matter?' he repeated after me. 'That is what I ask you to tell me, Cooper Silwood. . . . I arrived in London yesterday, and was taken ill. Feeling better this evening, I came out to get some fresh air, and strolled down this way. I remembered where your rooms were, and glancing up at the lighted window saw a figure passing and repassing. I was certain it was not you. This was a bald man with a moustache. . . . I watched him for some minutes. Then I went down to the lodge and was let in, as I said I wished to see you on urgent business. Now here I am, and here you are! Did you know about this man being here—the man I saw? He gave me quite a start.'

"I did not speak immediately, being somewhat flurried by the sudden appearance of Thornton. He now came quite close to me, and peered into my face. I saw he looked ill and greatly changed, and his hands were shaking. He went on peering into my face, so that I wondered why.

"'What are you doing with that paint on your cheeks?' he asked.

"I had forgotten the stain on my face—the stain

that was part of my disguise. This question disconcerted me.

"'Was it you, Cooper Silwood, that I saw? It was! It was! What does this mean?' he demanded, visibly agitated. 'You are not the kind of man who goes to a masked ball. One would think you were practising, rehearsing some part . . . a disguise . . . seeing how it would do . . . but why, Silwood, why? One would think there was something wrong—that you were about to abscond.'

"All this he said in jerky sentences, while his cheeks turned a horrible bluish purple. I recalled he had written to us that he was suffering from heart-disease, and I was alarmed for him.

"'Calm yourself, Morris,' I said to him, soothingly, but with the opposite effect.

"'Explain, explain!' he cried, in tones of great excitement, his body trembling the while.

"My wits by this time had come back to me, and I assured him I had promised a young friend to go to a masked ball to take care of him—that was all; and that I could not but feel sorry he had caught me in the manner he had. In fact, I tried to laugh the matter off; but I failed to disarm his suspicions, which evidently had been keenly aroused. He sat down on a chair, breathing very heavily. I entreated him to return to his hotel, but he declined.

"'Cooper Silwood,' he said, 'I do not believe you are telling me the truth. I do not believe this invention of yours about the masked ball. Again I tell you, you are not that kind of man.'

"'You do not know what you are saying,' I protested, 'your illness——'

"'Enough, enough!' he cried, jumping up. Then he stood for a moment struggling with himself as it were, clutched at his throat, staggered, and fell in a heap on the floor. I rushed forward to raise him, but he was already dead. When I saw he was dead, I was distraught. First I put on my disguise once more, and went forth into the night, reeling like a blind man. But a few minutes' thought induced me to return. I resolved to leave London by the earliest train, and did leave next morning."

Exhausted by this long effort, Silwood ceased speaking. Gilbert never doubted Silwood had spoken the truth. Besides, he had noticed how in several points his statements were confirmed by the evidence at the inquest on Morris Thornton. The explanation of the Mystery of Lincoln's Inn was, after all, curiously simple, once the facts were known in their entirety.

"I believe I have told you all," said Silwood, as Gilbert stood silently by his bed. "Is there anything you wish to ask me? If there is, ask it now, for I feel a dreadful weakness coming over me."

As the man spoke, a shiver shook him from head to foot.

"No. I think there is nothing else," said Gilbert, gently, his heart again softened.

"You will not forget your promise about my wife and child?" Silwood asked eagerly.

"I shall not."

"They need never know who Cooper Silwood was, need they?"

"Perhaps not," agreed Gilbert, but doubtingly.

"If you can, let them believe I am none other than the James Russell they love, and who loves——"

But Silwood's voice failed him; his eyes overflowed.

"Let us go," said Gilbert to Hankey.

"What an extraordinary man!" exclaimed Hankey to Gilbert, when they were in the open air. "Wonderfully bright, too, but he chose to run crooked, not straight. Yet there was good in the man—I suppose there is in every man."

"He was an evil, wicked man," said Gilbert, speaking of Silwood as one already dead, "but he was not all evil, all wicked."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

"What do you now intend to do?" asked the detective, after they had emerged from the hospital tent.

"Go back to St. Paul by the first train," Gilbert replied, "and see what are the contents of that compartment in the Minnesota Safety Deposit Vaults. I don't doubt Silwood told the truth, but I wish to have his statement confirmed."

"Naturally," remarked Hankey. "And after that?"

"I think of asking you, if you can manage it, to come with me to St. Paul to-day. I should prefer to have you with me when I go to the Safety Deposit Vaults, where you are probably well known——"

The detective nodded.

"——thereafter, I propose that you should return here, and await events."

"Till Silwood is dead, I suppose you mean. And then?"

"Take care of Mrs. Russell and the child. If they wish to return to England, be kind enough to carry out their desire. You shall have enough funds from me for all purposes. If they elect to stay in this country, I want you to find them a home, and I will see that the income promised is remitted to you quarterly."

"Very good," said the detective. "My business in

this matter is your business. I'll go and see if there's a train southwards soon."

But they had to wait some hours, and it was the morning of another day when they arrived in St. Paul.

Gilbert and the detective went to the Minnesota Safety Deposit Vaults, and on their representing they had received the key of the compartment from James Russell, no objection was made to their entering the place, and withdrawing the papers from the receptacle in which they were deposited. On inspection these papers were found to consist of Bank of England notes, of various values from £100 to £1000, amounting in all to £40,000; of gold bonds of half a dozen different American railroads, each bond of the value of a thousand dollars, coming in the aggregate to nearly a quarter of a million sterling; of bonds of the United States Government for more than £200,000; and of miscellaneous securities, the grand total being upwards of half a million sterling. One feature of all these certificates, bonds, and shares, was they were all payable to bearer, just as Silwood had said, as also, of course, were the Bank of England notes.

Half a million sterling!

Such was the vast sum Cooper Silwood had accumulated at the expense of the clients of Eversleigh, Silwood and Eversleigh.

Gilbert knew that the amount, roughly speaking, for which the firm was responsible was about £400,000. Here, then, was sufficient, and more, to satisfy all claims in full, and leave a good deal over for Mrs. James Russell and her son. Gilbert resolved that after the obligations of the firm were discharged, the balance should be placed in trust for her and the boy.

Having come to this conclusion, Gilbert sent Hankey back to the scene of the catastrophe. Then he despatched a brief cable to his brother Ernest, saying, "Russell found. Property recovered. Returning." He was afraid to put more than these few words into the message, lest by some mischance they should fall into the wrong hands.

Without delay, Gilbert left St. Paul for Chicago and New York, reaching the latter city in about forty hours safely. The possession of the equivalent of half a million in a bag, which he never for a moment let out of his sight, made him extremely anxious and uneasy. During the journey from St. Paul to New York he did not allow himself to sleep, but kept a determined eye on the bag. But no one suspected he was the bearer of such an amount of riches, and he passed comparatively unnoticed from start to finish.

On reaching New York, he at once went to the office of the line by which he had come from England, and was pleased to hear that there was a ship going out that very day at two o'clock in the afternoon, and that he could sail on her if he wished. He replied that it would suit him admirably. After paying for his passage, he produced the bag, and inquired if it could be placed in the ship's strong room, to which assent was given. Gilbert now felt his mind was at rest.

Yet during the voyage he was visited now and again by misgivings, as he had heard that even the strong rooms of Atlantic greyhounds have not always been burglar-proof. Then the ship was struck by a tempest in mid-ocean, and Gilbert was afraid both he and the treasure might go to the bottom. But at length

the ship sailed into port, and there, at the side of the dock, was Ernest waiting for him.

After the two brothers had embraced, and Ernest, in reply to Gilbert's inquiry, had told him their father was in much the same condition as when Gilbert had seen him last, he produced a cablegram, addressed to Gilbert, which had been received at the office in Lincoln's Inn some five days before.

"It is about Silwood, I think," said Gilbert.

The cablegram was from Hankey; it ran as follows—

"Russell dead. Wife desires return England. Writing."

"Silwood is dead," said Gilbert, briefly.

"Dead! I never thought to hear that!" exclaimed Ernest.

"I have much to tell you, Ernie; but wait until we are in the train. Besides, I must get a bag out of the ship's strong room. There may be some little delay over it; come with me."

Gilbert went back to the ship, whence, a short time afterwards, he issued, bearing the precious bag.

"Do you see this bag?" he said to his brother in a whisper. "It is worth half a million of money."

"Gilbert!"

"It is the truth; it contains Silwood's hoard."

In silence the brothers passed into the train for London. Once it was well under way, Gilbert told Ernest all that had happened.

"Fancy Silwood being so attached to his wife and child!" cried Ernest. "What a strange mixture he was! And now he is dead—really dead this time! What

a colossal failure he made of his life! And yet he could not have carried out his schemes with the success he did achieve had he not been a man of remarkable ability."

"Yes; but he has made others suffer. Think of father!"

"Yes; and yourself, indirectly, and Kitty."

"Any news of her?" asked Gilbert, wistfully.

"No."

"Have you been again to York to see Bennet?"

"No; but Deakin, the local solicitor, has arranged for me to see him on Tuesday next."

Then there fell a silence between the brothers. Ernest was thinking over what he had heard from Gilbert about Silwood and the recovery of the money and the bonds; while Gilbert dwelt sadly on the image of Kitty, wondering how she was bearing up and passing the time while Bennet lay in prison. Then his mind shifted to the consideration of what still lay before Ernest and himself.

"There will be much to think of, much to do," he said to Ernest. "I mean with respect to winding up the affairs of the firm."

"Is it necessary, do you think, to wind up its affairs?"

"We must do something. What I thought was, that a letter to the clients should be drawn up, stating that, as Silwood is dead and father incapacitated by ill-health, the firm must be wound up; but that you—a son of Francis Eversleigh, who had been for some time associated with him in the business—proposed to begin a new business under the style of Eversleigh and Eversleigh, and would be glad to have the same confidence

extended to you by the clients of the old firm as they had shown to Eversleigh, Silwood and Eversleigh. Something of that kind—that's what I thought."

"Yes. There is one point," said Ernest, thoughtfully. "The properties Silwood sold, such as house property and land property; what is to be done about them?"

"I don't think we need try to replace them. In all such cases, I would go to the particular clients themselves, tell them the truth, and offer full compensation. You must remember Silwood's hoard amounts to far more than the firm owes, and you are perfectly entitled to make every necessary use of it."

When the brothers arrived in London, their first care was to take the half-million bag to their bank, where they deposited the money and left the bonds in the care of the manager. Then they went to Lincoln's Inn, and proceeded to draft the letter Gilbert had suggested. The following day these letters were despatched. One of them had a singular result; it was that which was addressed to Harry Bennet.

The brothers had discussed what was to be done in his case, and had decided that, though Bennet had given a discharge to the firm, yet he must be paid the value of the property, Beauclerk Mansions, which Silwood had sold. So a special note had been placed at the foot of the letter sent him, apprizing him of their intention.

At the same time a letter was sent to Deakin, the York solicitor, informing him that as the firm of Eversleigh, Silwood and Eversleigh was being wound up, owing to the continued ill health of the sole remaining partner, the firm could no longer act with him

for Bennet, and further, that Mr. Gilbert Eversleigh had returned to them his brief in this case.

The first result of this was that Deakin came rushing up to London. He had seen Bennet, who, wild with rage and defeated spite, had ordered him to go and see what was the meaning of this change of front on the part of the Eversleighs.

"Mr. Bennet," said Deakin, "is the most reckless man I ever saw. He behaves like a lunatic, and says the most mad things. He tells me—of course, I know it is absurd—that he can send Mr. Francis Eversleigh to prison for embezzlement, and he demands again that Mr. Gilbert Eversleigh appear for him at his trial."

It was Ernest Eversleigh to whom Deakin spoke. Ernest, acting on the advice of Gilbert, told Deakin in confidence as much of the facts as was necessary, winding up by saying—

"My father, no doubt, might still be proceeded against, but he is out of his mind. Besides, I offer the fullest compensation. Taking these two things together, is there need to say more?"

"I should say not," replied Deakin, without a moment's hesitation.

And back Deakin went to York, and acquainted Bennet with what he had learned. For a time Bennet refused to believe what Deakin had told him about the recovery of the money from Silwood, but when at last he was convinced of it, he fell into a great surly silence, from which he could not be drawn. When Deakin spoke of obtaining the services of an eminent counsel for his defence, Bennet made no reply. Instead of giving way to anger, as he usually did when he heard anything that displeased him, he sat gloomy and sullen.

After trying for ten minutes to get a word out of him, and failing, Deakin left the prison.

Next morning he received a hurried summons to the Governor of the Prison's room, and there he heard that Bennet, in spite of the fact that he was constantly watched night and day, had somehow managed to open a vein in his arm and had bled to death in the night.

"The warder, who was guarding him at the time," said the Governor, "saw him lying on his bed fast asleep, as he supposed; when it was daylight blood was noticed on the floor, and then it was found that Bennet was dead."

"But how did he get an instrument with which to open a vein in his arm?" asked Deakin, aghast.

"The surgeon says," answered the Governor, "that the vein was bitten open. The act was done with great determination. You saw him yesterday, I believe; was there anything in what you told him to account for the deed?"

"I brought him news that greatly disappointed him, but nothing to account for this. Poor devil!"

But Deakin did not know all.

When Bennet's death became public, there were many who said he had cheated the gallows, and few mourned for the lost life and the career gone fatally wrong.

Even Kitty Thornton, in her kind heart, could not sincerely say she was sorry he was dead. Indeed, in the years that came after, she never thought of Harry Bennet without growing quiet and pensive far beyond her wont, as she reflected how, in one way and another, she had been saved from him.

* * * * * *

Gilbert Eversleigh and Kitty Thornton did not come together at once again—the shadow of Bennet lay between them, but in the course of time they did, as was inevitable.

"When thou doest well unto thyself," said the satirist, "all men will speak well of thee."

And Gilbert Eversleigh, the rising barrister, backed by the beauty and wealth of his wife, is spoken well of by all the world.

The other side of life's double shield is to be seen at Ivydene, where there may be beheld, nursed and tended by a wife's unchanging love, and a daughter's unalterable affection, a white-haired, bent figure, from whose loose lips there comes the question, over and over again, "What o'clock is it? What o'clock is it?"

THE END

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